India

the Road to Renaissance

A Vision and
an Agenda

Bhimeswara Challa

While India is preoccupied with its next general election, the real issues that could determine what kind of a people and society we should aim to be are pushed under the carpet. It is such issues that this book seeks to flush out and flag. It is both audacious and ambitious in its identification of what ails India and how to fix it. When India, at last, became free to chart its own course, it chose 'colonial' continuity. That got reflected as an entirely un-Indian Constitution and Westminster-style of governance and trickle-down economic model. The two malaises that are afflicting our nation are near moral meltdown and pervasive mediocrity. In addition, we became a soft society, prone to 'exceptional escapism and Faustian-choice making'.

The book proposes a package of radical reforms intended to shift the very epicenter of political and economic decision-making to the level where people live their daily lives. As a part of the 'package', we need to supplant the current one by India's first *Indian* Constitution, inspired by its own traditions and practices. In addition, the Constitution must also introduce and empower grassroots self-governance; make the needs of the 'most-needy' the fulcrum of the growth strategy, and replace election by voting by what the ancient Greeks called sortition, election by lot, a system that was also in vogue in parts of India too in its history.

What is significant is that it does not end with a pious wish-list; it offers concrete ideas on how to concretize and implement the suggested reforms.

Cover: sculpture of a woman,
by Challa Nirmala

India – The Road to Renaissance

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India—The Road to Renaissance: A Vision and an Agenda

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To Bharat Mata,
who, after seventy-seven years of life in ‘freedom’,
finds herself still enchained—
now by her own children.

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What the Book Seeks to Say, and My Role

At last, this the moment. The writing is done away with; the result is out there in the reading world; not a word can henceforth be moderated or modified—with hindsight or with any brief flash of wisdom or regret. As with my previous books, this one too '*got written by me*'. At this point in time, I, Bhimeswara, am like *Vighneswara*, scribe to Sage Veda Vyasa, author of the epic Mahabharata. The only difference is that Vighneswara could see Veda Vyasa right in front of his eyes, while, in my case, I have no clue who 'my Vyasa' could conceivably be. But having been 'chosen' to write this book, I have done my best. That also emboldened me to say things I might have demurred had I truly been the author.

And now, let me come to this particular book that bears my name, by default because the 'author' has no known name. Still, a word of caution is in order. Writing about India at this truly transformative moment in time can work out wrong; like navigating a veritable labyrinth with a blindfold, pregnant with every possibility of peril and pitfall. Yet it cannot be ducked. What happens to India in the next decade or so will not only impact on the quality of life of one out of six humans on earth, but could heavily influence the direction and dynamics of global destiny itself. For the purpose of clarity, a word of clarification too will

be apt. The book often uses the word 'India' rather loosely and opaquely. What it mostly signifies is either the country as it is today, or its people as they have come to be. India itself is ancient, eternal; everything else about it is fleeting, evanescent.

After a sweeping, periscopic appraisal of where India is positioned after 75 years as a fully sovereign republic, the 'Author' concludes that the score card shows an eclectic record, with the shady side larger than the sunny side; that what India has achieved, impressive as it is in aggregate terms, is dwarfed by several slip-ups and stumbles. Truth is that what we have accomplished appears satisfying and striking only when juxtaposed with the worst-case scenario. The blame game hardly leaves anyone pristine, no one can properly plead innocence. In a democracy of the kind India has been, it all boils down to '*We, the people*', the *janata*. Everything else is a detail, including the ruling class, regardless of any specific affiliation, whom we call *Netas*. For, without the janata, a Neta is nothing. Netas are far too morally slippery and power-thirsty not to be tactically good, if people genuinely want integrity in public life, the one commodity we are woefully short of. It is this draining deficit that has mired our society in a quagmire of low morals and high mediocrity. It shows up in everyday life as malice, meanness, and as what poet Longfellow (*Santa Filomena*, 1858) called 'meaner cares', silencing what Abe Lincoln called 'our better angels'. There is no passion or zeal in India for anything more meaningful than one's own immediacy, or for cricket and movies.

The malaise began at India's very birth. It was a bad beginning. Awakened from a long stretch of slavery and subjugation, and in a position to pave its own

governing pathway in tune with its own unique model of political plurality and civilizational unity, India opted for a colonial institutional continuum, legitimized by its very Constitution. Our leaders who fought for freedom became hesitant and fearful of exerting that very 'freedom', traumatized by Partition. They settled for the European concept of the ideal nation-state, wherein a single religion, a single language, a single ethnicity, and a single economy are assumed to be the only "natural" basis for a sustainable political unit. Further, what has always been integral and indispensable to Indian polity—complexity, contrariety, polycentricism—came to be viewed as a handicap that could hinder nascent nationhood. The result is that most of us are confused about what is the right way to relate with our own motherland's past triumphs and tragedies, and its peaks and valleys. Far fewer of us even think of India as a sublime spiritual entity, with a selfhood of its own, loftier than the sum of all our lives, desires, and dreams.

Having framed the somber setting, the 'Author', secure in his anonymity, does not hesitate to call a spade a shovel, and moves on to put on the table a bold and no-holds-barred package of reforms and basic course corrections to overcome the impasse we see today, and to put India on the 'road to renaissance', to help it flower to its full bloom. The crux and core of them all is to shift the center of gravity of the apparatus of the Indian state, and the thrust of political and economic action, to the proximate neighborhood where people lead their lives. The chief hindrance to that end is none other than the one that has legitimized the India Republic, the Constitution of India, which has proven to be not only un-Indian but *unworkable*. It is the fountainhead of all the ethnic, religious and regional 'rebellions' we see in

India, which could push India, if allowed to gather strength, into an irreversible state of entropy. The Constitution must wean itself away from stereotypes of unitary or federal, or parliamentary or presidential, and must be replaced with India's first '*Indian*' Constitution, rooted in its own DNA and inspired by its own democratic precedents and republican examples. Complex as it surely is, formidable are the forces arrayed against it, we can dither and delay at great peril. With all constitutional roads closed for that purpose, this book proposes a daringly out-of-the box road map. Equally ground-breaking are its other proposals like moving the governing needle from top-down to grassroots; morphing the way to pick our rulers by replacing the very method of casting votes in favor of selection by lots, i.e., by *sortition*, or a blend of both; putting the health and happiness of people and needs of the 'most-needy', at the epicenter of economic aspiration, instead of GDP and 'developed country' status; and ideas on how to make Indian diaspora partners in India's renaissance. Although the bulk of the book deals with internal issues, it also touches upon the domestic dimensions of India's growing global footprint and on how to deal with the dragon, China.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of this book on India is that it does not end with a feel-good 'wish-list' and a pious prayer for success. What is called for to awaken this somnolent and smug society, it says, is nothing short of a massive nation-wide mass mobilization. As a platform to give it some shape and substance, it recommends some innovative ideas like forging a blend of two tested models of social activism: Gandhian *satyagraha* (to overcome entrenched obstacles and social ills), imbued with the healing touch of the African philosophical ethic, *Ubuntu*.

But here again, for a country with the size, diversity, and complexity like that of India, to outflank the hurdles and to create a self-momentum, it suggests the 'critical mass' strategy, which is to motivate and impel, according to latest research, only around 3.5% of its citizens to be rebels against rank injustice of any kind, tempered by the Ubuntu ethic of '*I am because we are*'. India now needs to cool down and calm down, break down the walls of bitterness and distrust, grudges, and grievances. It needs as much of heart-to-heart *reconciliation* (with regard to caste, society, religion) as civilizational, mental, and moral *renaissance*. For a country like India, reconciliation must also be multidimensional, microregional, and multilayered. Peace, amity and prosperity in India can be furthered only through such an approach.

To make it personal and practical, it commends the example of the 'hundredth monkey'[1] in the allegory of the same name, where isolated action can trigger a species-scale behavioral change. Each one of us should imagine ourselves to be that one person whose advocacy and activism carries the power to tip the balance and help give India the right directional deviation and course reversal.

Few books, if any, contain provocative and original ideas on so many subjects so vital to India's future and its people's well-being. One may agree or not, but surely, they are worthy of calm contemplation, candid conversation,

1. The hundredth monkey effect is an esoteric idea claiming that a new behavior or idea is spread rapidly by unexplained means from one group to all related groups once a critical number of members of one group exhibit the new behavior or acknowledge the new idea. (Source: *Hundredth Monkey Effect*. Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. Wikimedia Foundation).

and unbiased deliberation. Unless we do that, it matters not how many elections we hold and how many governments come and go. Now is the moment for India to marshal its will and *virya* or energy to put it firmly on its road to renaissance. As has been said, 'there is a tide in public and private affairs, which awaits both men and nations'. If we let this slip by, the next one might be too late. For, as Brutus tells Cassius in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, 'we must take the current when it serves', or risk getting overtaken by the flood of the rising fury of the people.

Bhimeswara Challa
Hyderabad, India
February 2024

What I Owe to Whom

Any human endeavor always involves more than one person, some explicit, many implicit. A book, although it bears the name of an author of any sort, is the product of many more who help in preparing the manuscript and in the printing and publication process. In the instant case, I must first express my deep gratitude to the one corresponding to Veda Vyasa of the Mahabharata, the *de jure* author, for selecting me—although there must be many more suitable persons and less handicapped than me—as his keyboarder, as the one to give shape to his thoughts, to bring them into the public domain at this critical moment when Indian people and the Indian State are called upon to make several consequential choices, and when the public discourse is so prosaic and foul, trite and jejune.

Coming to the penning process, putting thoughts down on paper, I was the proxy who sat for hundreds of hours spread over two years, and pounded at the computer keyboard to give effect to the silent dictates of the invisible author. That also meant that I was 'away' from the physical world that long. Since the world cannot stand still, it meant extra pressure on my many-splendored and much-talented wife, Nirmala. Although not apparent, she played a significant part in bringing to light the ideas and contents of this book. I am truly grateful for her priceless part; so

should those who value this work. Among those who were involved in converting what would have been disjointed typed material into printable form, I must single out Vijay Ramchander, technically the language editor but effectively far, far more, a collaborator. That is not only because of my own impairments that made editing more difficult, but also due to his outstanding character and impeccable integrity. Unlike my previous books in which he also played a similar role, this was more taxing but he handled it well. So, I tip my hat to him and say thank you. Another person I must mention in this context is Ira Vangipurapu, who, though she came in at a later stage, managed to quickly grasp what needed to be done and brought in academic/editorial inputs of high quality. So, thank you, Ira. I would also like to thank Amit Garg, managing director of Gyan Books, and his supporting staff, for their full cooperation in accommodating my requests in publishing this book.

Another expression of my gratitude relates to my enduring beliefs: the living too easily ignore their debt to the dead. In simple words, had they not lived then we wouldn't be living now. If I am around here to have had anything to do with this book, it is because of all those who nurtured me to be in a position to do what I am able to now as a writer. Foremost among them were my parents, Challa Kameswara Rao and Challa Sooramma, and my siblings, some of whom are no longer with us. If I do not offer my gratitude to them, I will be committing the sin of *kruthaghhnatha*, ingratitude.

Dearest among those who are no longer with me today, was my daughter Padmalu, who departed for a far better place in 2020, which seems like yesterday. She left a hole in my heart which for this nearing ninety body is

increasingly difficult to bear. Hence, this book could well be my swansong, at least in terms of creative effort, which really began way back in 1956 when I penned the Telugu novel '*Kshantavyulu*'. Not much to boast of, but by now 'my task is done—the song hath ceased'. And I say this without, as Socrates said about the dying swan, 'foreknowledge of the blessings in the other world'. But I do know that life holds no promise of any bliss any longer. It is time therefore to say thanks and farewell to anyone who even cursorily glances at any word on any page in all the written material that bears my name. Nothing in life is an accident, and no one is a stranger and everything has a consequence. By that lone gesture, you have made my whole labor worth its while. Since words fail me, I must borrow those spoken by the Bard (*Twelfth Night*) and say, 'I can no other answer make but thanks, and thanks, and ever thanks…'

Finally, as an Indian of this generation, it would be a grievous remiss if I do not express both gratitude and an apology to 'Mother India' or Bharat Mata. Gratitude for letting me be one of her children; apology for being one of those who let her down in so many ways and made her bear the consequences.

1

Setting and Scoreboard

The Theft of History

Admittedly, seventy-five years for a new nation and ancient civilization, is an inflectional moment, a time for robust reflection and intrepid introspection. We should however keep, at the back of our minds, that this physiographic region, projecting southwards into the Indian Ocean from the Himalayas, which we now call the Indian subcontinent, has always been more than a mere State or Nation or a society in modern parlance. It has represented the rare and remarkable phenomenon of the state and the society co-existing, apart from and in some degree of independence of each other, as distinct and separate entities, as independent centers of national, popular, and collective life and activity. A policy of non-interference was recognized as the ideal policy of the state, the functions of which were ordinarily restricted to the irreducible minimum. The points of contact between the state and the ordinary interests of the daily life of the people were indeed very few.

A good illustration of it is that in ancient India, the king was the head of the state, but not of the society.[1] This was in marked contrast to the Western model, in which "the state, beginning as an agent of society, becomes its master and representative; society is merged in the state to which it surrenders its functions, dropping its independent life." It was this kind of separation of state and society,

that enabled citizens of multiple kingdoms and empires and republics (who often were at each other's throats), to nurture and share a feeling of togetherness, relatedness, and affinity, as if they all belonged to an organism to which these different communities were organically linked. That sense of 'common belonging' did not dilute in any way its plurality of caste, race, religion, ethnicity, languages, cultures, customs, and practices.

What occurred on 15 August 1947 was simply one more episode in India's hoary history or, more to the point, pre-history, with its change of rulers and internal boundaries. When we look back and take stock and assess where we are and what happened, or did not, we should assess not the state of post-independent India but of the Indian civilization—by common consent one of the greatest still surviving civilizations of the world. Our past beyond the Mughals is a blur. We are not even sure if the Mughals were invaders or Indians, whether the Islamic conquest of India was benign and benevolent, as some contend, or if their record was 'the bloodiest story in world history' *à la* Will Durant. We are not sure whether we should simply ignore our past history and turn a new leaf on the grounds that it would only reopen old wounds, or get the record straight and be aware of the full unvarnished, not fabricated or whitewashed, truth, not as a weapon of vengeance but because 'a nation that has no history can have no future'. We are not sure if we should mourn the repeated alien invasions that ransacked and looted India, or celebrate the valor and the fierce resistance put up by our people for over 500 years. We are not sure if the British 'unified' or plundered India, 'civilized' the natives, or caused famines that starved tens of millions to death. Some historians

signal that what we have been exposed to as Indian history is actually the 'invaders' history,' or the Indian version of what Jack Goody called the 'theft of history'.[2]

In India's instance, it is not stealing; it is surrender, not only of its sovereignty, but also of its history, to the conqueror. The irony is that we, the victims, still seem to have no problem with that 'theft.' What we assume as factual facts of our past are fully false; our defeats have been highlighted, not our valor and victories. For example, when we read about the Islamic conquests, there is little account, if any, of the several instances of Indian resistance and triumphs, which are vividly detailed in scholarly works such as *Indian Resistance to Early Muslim Invaders*.[3] Indeed, as someone said, we got used to celebrating our humiliations. Few, if any, know the names of the many Indian kings, chieftains, and warriors who fought and often defeated the invaders. When one reads accounts of their exploits, one is struck by their bravery and heroism, as well as by the tragic fact that they never combined forces to fight the outsider. Throughout history, it was the Indian tradition to treat the outsider like one of our own; we thus literally played into the hands of invaders who were invariably better armed.

We are aware that the lack of history written by Indians was partly because the tradition of writing and keeping historical records was non-existent in India. For a long time, the main means of communication was verbal or oral. Historical passivity, if not amnesia, continued even when we could set it right. The fact is that few cared about what happened hundreds (or even thousands) of years ago. Many still don't. We have in India what Koenraad Elst, the Belgian orientalist and Indologist, called 'full-fledged brand of negationism'.[4] The typical stance is: 'how does it

better my life, and help with the problems and fortunes of today?' Such a refrain by itself gives a peek into how far we have strayed, and where we are stranded collectively as a people… We must remember that, as George Orwell said, "the most effective way to destroy a people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history."

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Why We Are What We Are

We can justly hold our heads high for being inheritors of such a civilization. However, we should not flinch from revisiting, however painful it might be, what happened to that civilization along the way, particularly since the medieval times. Such a vigorous visitation can only lead to one seminal question: Why are we what and who we are, and what went wrong, when, how, and why? How could such a great civilization of eminence, excellence, and sterling achievements descend to such a nadir as we see today?

Even after 75 years of political unity, we allow our civilization's greatest strength—our diversity, plurality, and synergy—to be our greatest shortcoming; it has become divisive. And we have tried to 'unify' the country through uniformity and undermining group identity. We just cannot stand each other; we see each other's faults more than their virtues. That is what distinguishes us from the Chinese, for example. They look down upon a foreigner; we look up to him. Is it, as V.S. Naipaul says, due to the "intellectual depletion that must have come to India with the invasions and conquests of the last thousand years"?[5] The fact is that

what India is deficient in, is not intellect but integrity. We can understand that what impelled repeated invasions is the lure of India's wealth and abundance. The question is, what made India such a soft target and sitting duck, not only for repeated invasions and onslaughts but also for prolonged alien occupation? Even the mightiest power cannot forcibly rule over another land for centuries, if the people refuse to be ruled. We still harbor no rancor for our occupiers; if only we were so forgiving and large-hearted towards one another! Is there something that went missing or got twisted in the character and construct of India's people, or in the content and thrust of the faith they have adopted in their way of living? If it is the people, does it have anything to do with the milieu, the soil, the land, or the climate? Is there any biological or neurological basis for what Albert Einstein reportedly remarked, that 'people from the Indian subcontinent could be held back and have their thinking backward due to the climate and the environment'?[6] Repetitive invasions took place because India, at that time, was a land of tempting riches and abundance to be looted. That was understandable, but was that all there was to it?

The larger point was that others' 'hatred' of Hinduism did not affect the Hindus' willful acceptance of rule by those who had contempt for them. The arch-imperialist Winston Churchill not only sneered that "India is a geographical term… it is no more a united nation than the equator", but also said that should the British be forced to leave India, "eventually, the Moslems will become masters, because they are warriors, while the Hindus are windbags."[7]

While Britain drew inspiration from such a product of 'cultural chauvinism, Eurocentrism, and intolerant imperialism,' India took great pride in a larger, world view;

as Rabindranath Tagore said: "India has always laid the foundation for an inclusive civilization. She has never driven away any outsider…"[8] We mistakenly assumed then and even now, that it was a sign of how 'good' Hindus were. That was why our conquerors had such condescending contempt for Hindus. But we still chanted '*Atithi devo bhava*.' The irony was that many Indians admired the British, among other things for their 'decency, discipline, and fairness'.

The British, in turn "Viewed Indian bodies discursively. To reaffirm their sense of superiority, they reduced their Indian subjects to animal-like beings incapable of controlling their own reproduction."[9] India would never have allowed this to happen if the colonizer was a non-European country. Even if such colonizers somehow 'conquered', they could not have continued. We would have felt 'superior' and revolted. That sense of servility to the white people, and condescension, even if not contempt, for all others, continues. Our fawning attentiveness and almost instinctive obsequity is all too obvious, and has not gone unnoticed. So obvious that a 'white man' is left perplexed: "I just don't quite understand why. When was the collective decision made to be so accommodating to us white people?"[10] Indeed, it is not only we Indians. The same story elsewhere, according to the same 'white man': "… the history of white people abroad is one of exploitation, violence, and destruction. If the past provides any lesson at all, it's that if you let enough of us in, we're liable to steal your biggest diamond and redraw your borders. You welcome us at your peril."[11]

Even in India, the 'white-Indian' feels superior, and is considered more handsome or beautiful, more marketable, and 'marriageable'. In India still, 'white is right', and when

we say the 'outside world' we care about, we mean the 'white man's world'. Our Western, alias white, fixation extends to foreign policy too. We make extra effort to bolster ties with Western Europe and the USA, and exclude the rest. We are so besotted by the West.

The story of our seemingly endless incapacities must start with our understanding that what really happened on 15 August 1947 was a political 'transfer of power', while our consciousness remained changed, shaped and steeped in a millennium of alien subjugation. Our diversity, plurality, and synergy continue to be our Achilles heel. We are a people steeped in doubt. We seem so traumatized by our past that somewhere deep in our consciousness we collectively decided that we really do not have a past worthy of recall. We can't agree among ourselves whether we should gloat or grieve, thump our chest or hang our head.

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Ancient India and Lessons for the Future

Sons of the same soil

One of the perhaps unintended positive outcomes of the *Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav*—the government's initiative to 'celebrate' the seventy-fifth anniversary of India's emancipation from colonial rule and classical imperialism—was to impel many to think deeply about how to bring about a kind of bridge between what ancient India was, and what modern India should be. This is good, because practically no other people in the world are as blissfully

indifferent as most Indians are about how their distant ancestors lived, and about their art, composite culture, traditions, and heritage. There are those like Prime Minister Narendra Modi who say that a country like India with such a glorious heritage should have been brimming with self-confidence and self-respect, but that 'concocted history' and 'fabricated narratives' which its people imbibed led to a sense of inferiority.[12] Indeed, "part of India's rise would be to delve back into our culture and pull from it, the knowledge, the wisdom, the experience."[13] But many Indians today are not only ignorant, but some even see ignorance as a sign of modernity and secularism and scientific temper. We have long had two opposing stylized prototypes: one, a primitive, backward, caste-driven, male-chauvinistic land oppressed by kings; the other, a glorious, golden, prosperous, egalitarian society governed by *dharma* and ruled by enlightened potentates and republics. The fact is also that India, eons ago, was both (what we now call) a 'civilization' and a 'nation', what was then known as *Bharatavarsha* or *Bharatakhanda*.

The primary reason why the Indian civilization (in contrast to other civilizations, like Greek, Roman, Egyptian, etc.) has survived uninterrupted till today is that it was more cultural and spiritual, than political and material. In that sense, it was not a 'state' as we now understand. The takeaway inference is that although what was called undivided India before Partition was governed from time to time by multiple rulers, there has always been a visceral connecting thread across the territory south of the Himalayas and north of the Indian Ocean. It was said, "… for several centuries, the avarice of monarchs, even of the greatest, impacted the sovereign republics only to a limited

extent, with not much effect on the internal management of guilds, or religious *sanghas*, or the social life in the villages. As a matter of fact, the conquerors were hardly interested in restructuring the society, or to carve out kingdoms as we visualize them today.[14]

What was particular about ancient India was that even though the people were ruled by various republics, *rajas* and *samrats*, people considered themselves as 'sons of the same soil'. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan even suggested that, originally, Hinduism was more territorial than creedal. Even though Indian history showed a sort of linear alternation of large domestic empires with clusters of fragmented kingdoms, it did not come in the way of a sense of 'belonging' to a larger civilization. It is in this historical milieu that what we call 'governance' must be understood. This was central to, and clearly crafted and codified in, various treatises and texts like the *Arthashastra*, the *Manusmriti*, and the *Shanti Parva* (in the Mahabharata), and more topically, in Gandhi's vision of a 'confederation of village republics'. What we should understand is that historically and culturally, people always came together to address common problems, be it at the local level, the village level, or the town level. Governance suitable to the Indian ethos must be built around its more than half a million villages. The real challenge with India is that it is trying to be democratic in its functioning, when its basic governance framework is unsuitable for such functioning.

Pre-modern India

Ancient India was able to blend what are generally viewed as unmixable: material well-being (*artha* and *kama*) and

spiritual goals (*dharma* and *moksha*). The emphasis then was far greater on conduct as well as on character. The wisdom of the day was that climactic truth and true wisdom can be apprehended only through direct and extraordinary spiritual experiences. They were able to 'experience' such experiences because they were 'spiritually literate', to be able to read the signs of the sacred in everyday life. Non-attachment to worldly things was emphasized as a social value, and pursuit of material wealth was not ignored but strictly conditioned by dharmic or righteous means. And yet, from all accounts there was no mass poverty or hunger or destitution or malnutrition on the nature and scale of modern India. That it is a modern malaise highlights both the progressive and regressive aspects. 'Progressive' because, since it is man-made, it can also be erased through human effort. The fact is that just as humans have created great wealth, we have created great poverty. Although in its scope it is recent, the causes of poverty in India are deeply rooted in the global system, which has been programmed over thousands of years to benefit the richest and the most powerful. The 'regressive' is that there are so many people who control the global establishment and who benefit from global poverty, they will not let anything disturb the *status quo*. It was not that there were no 'poor' people in ancient India, or that there were sections of society whose basic needs were not met. Some scholars like Sanjay Sonawani[15] even posit that ancient Indian civilization was essentially egalitarian and being 'egalitarian' also meant that one should not look down on anyone.

Pre-modern India which, in the words of Mark Twain, was "the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother

of legend, and the great-grandmother of tradition," also reflected the earlier support mechanisms. The Indian subcontinent is one of the oldest inhabited regions of the planet; the species *Homo heidelbergensis* (a proto-human who was an ancestor of modern *Homo sapiens*) inhabited the subcontinent of India centuries before humans migrated into the region now known as Europe. Moreover, this region has given birth to great civilizations; the Indus Valley Civilization (c.7000–c.600 BCE) was among the greatest of the ancient world, covering more territory than either the Egyptian or Mesopotamian civilizations, and producing an equally vibrant and progressive culture. This hallowed land has given to humanity four major, '*dharmic*' religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, with a following that constitutes 25% of the world population. Philosophy, literature, science, mathematics, architecture, astronomy, technology, art, engineering, religion, and astronomy, among other fields, all flourished during this period, and resulted in some of the greatest of human achievements. In the words of the Baltic German philosopher Hermann von Keyserling, "India has produced the profoundest metaphysics that we know of… the absolute superiority of India over the West in philosophy; [poetry from the Mahabharata, containing the Bhagavad Gita,] perhaps the most beautiful work of the literature of the world."[16] It delivered to the world great visionaries like the Buddha, Mahavira, Adi Shankara, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Jiddu Krishnamurti, among many others. India was also a sort of a blend of a salad bowl and a melting pot, and it was, as Alex von Tunzelmann characterized, "an amorphous mass of different cultures, lifestyles, traditions and beliefs."[17]

It is nobody's fault; it is what it is. Growing up and getting educated in India and what getting ready for the world means is a complex process. Things were different in pre-modern India. Ancient Hindu texts spread their reach beyond India, to what are now Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia. We should have nurtured strong cultural and emotional bonding with these countries. No other people are as ignorant or so distasteful of the beautiful dimensions of their traditions as we Indians. In short, we are a people with an erased memory and selective consciousness. For many, India is a land of poverty and a population that is fatally fractured by the caste system. The history of India that is written is of 'invaders writing about their invasions, a history of battles we lost, not of those we won'. The textbooks children read today give a distorted and defeatist picture of our history, leaving a lasting impression on impressionable minds. We blur history and hypocrisy. We know only how to venerate or vilify historical figures; we are not capable of clinical objectivity. What is at stake is not just history, it is the future too. For, "If our textbooks don't teach the next generations about our greatness and flaws as a civilization, we are bound to repeat our mistakes."[18] We will stay what we are—apologetic of our past; unsure of our present, and fearful of our future.

India's physical, ethnic and linguistic variety is as staggering as its cultural pluralism, which exists in a framework of interconnectedness and interdependence. In nature, every living being has a dharma. Even a tree is expected to do its swadharma to sustain the cosmic order. To put it simply, dharma is "doing the right thing at the right time in the right way."[19] At the same time, we all have a higher dharma: to "realize the perfection within."[20] Such

a heritage, by its very nature, is fragile and needs protection and understanding, since it is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization. In Pavan Varma's words: "India must rank as one of the most unique civilizations of the world, marked by great antiquity, substantial refinements, and unprecedented audacity of thought. Why then do successive governments treat culture with such disrespect?"[21]

India today: culturally and politically fractured

In myriad ways, India defies neat, nice or crisp description or delineation, discernment or divination. But if we must simplify, synthesize or summarize, what springs to mind are the famous lines of W.B. Yeats: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold… The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. Surely some revelation is at hand."[22] How such a revelation or epiphany might manifest in India is hard to induce or infer or intuit. Sans any apology and shorn of all niceties, our greatest achievement after seventy-five years of self-rule is that we have not broken up into "32 separate nations that happen to be arrayed along the British rail line," as the Singaporean statesman Lee Kuan Yew apprehended. Our greatest failure is that as a people, we have failed to evolve an ennobling vision of India as a whole, and relate it to an overarching view of the interrelationship between politics, economics, social structure, cultural ethos, and value systems. It is this void that brings to the fore centrifugal forces of ethnicity, caste, creed, faith, language, etc. Post-independence, the expectation that these forces will be overwhelmed by the synergistic struggle for *swaraj*, and the superimposition

of the concept of a modern State with its attendant fringe benefits, has been mainly belied. The constitutional paradigm and the 'political arrangement' that we copied hasn't helped either. The quasi-federal structure—chosen to accommodate the kaleidoscopic plurality and diversity of India in order to facilitate a blend of self-rule and shared rule, strong Center and no-less-strong States—has not worked. It has led to strained center-state relations, each accusing the other of lack of good faith. This 'hostility' is exacting a heavy price on the nation's economy and progress. For example, something so vital as national education policy is now a political football. Some state governments like Tamil Nadu have even gone to the courts seeking to block the implementation of the National Education Policy (2020). State governments headed by opposition parties are now accusing the center of deliberately torpedoing the development of states.

In short, the Indian version of 'federalism', as delineated in its Constitution, has failed to achieve what, for example, the US Constitution did: fuse together thirteen disparate states with their own constitutions into a single nation and induce everyone to emotionally share a common political belonging and bond as an 'American'. Even after 75 years of sharing the same roof we have not become a family; our emotional identity is subnational and sectional, local and linguistic. What made the situation even more complicated was that while our essential sense of 'selfhood' is provincial and proximate, endogenous and local, the Constitution has put in place a paradigm of political power-structure that did not provide for the exercise of commensurate power at that ground level. Even after seventy-five years of India, a Prime Minister like Narendra Modi, hailed as 'all-powerful'

after being in office for eight years, could only offer the alibi of a 'colonial mindset' for India's ills and failures. We all have it in different ways and degrees—its expansiveness and exploitation.

We like to do to other fellow Indians what Britain did to India. What Modi has missed is that the Constitution of India, which he swears by, was itself a colonial construct. It was because "The framers' vision was clear—only a colonial constitution could lead India into a progressive post-colonial future."[23] It could mean only two things: India, as it is currently construed and constitutionally constructed, is simply ungovernable, or he (Modi) and his predecessors and the entire political class have proven unequal to the task of making a fresh start. We will do no better because we really have no clue or clarity of what has gotten wrong. There is not a single lesson we have learnt or a mistake we are willing to admit. For everything, we offer one of the three Es—evasion, explanation, or excuse.

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Our Score Card at 75

Paradoxes of Mother India

The world over, India was for long known as the land of paradoxes and anomalies, even apparent absurdities. It was once a place, as Swami Vivekananda described, "from whence, like tidal waves, spirituality and philosophy have again and again rushed out and deluged the world." India's

'brand value', if you will, was—and has to be—'spiritual', which is not 'anti-material', or 'anti-anything', one must note. What contemporary India chose, is, to paraphrase the 19th century English poet, painter and mystic William Blake, to 'barter our birthright for a mess of pottage'. This has always been the land where the sacred and the surreal, sublime and suffering, beautiful and brutal, cascading empathy and numbing cruelty, saintly tolerance and ethereal abstinence, have cozily cohabited. A defining feature of this society was sanctity and devotion in every domain.

India's tradition of assimilating, instead of resisting, 'alien' influences stemmed from the belief that, as Mahatma Gandhi said, "man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and therefore is not competent to punish" or reject anything not to his taste. When India became free from colonial conquest in 1947, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru eloquently spoke about India awakening to its 'life and dream' and meeting its 'tryst with destiny', not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. Indeed, way back, Nehru saw India's 'destiny' in another way. In his *Discovery of India*, written from the Ahmednagar Fort prison during Apr–Sept 1944, he wrote: "India can only be in the frontline in the comity of nations; it is her destiny."

When Nehru himself, acting on India's behalf, was in charge of India's destiny, the world too was excited, and expected much from him and India. It signaled not only the beginning of the 'setting of the sun on the British Empire' but also the process of decolonization in the world. In fact, even before it actually became an independent nation, many leading lights in the Western world were looking forward to the spiritual difference a free India could make to a world weary and wounded after the trauma of World

War II. Indeed, it was this very war that tipped the scales in the British decision to quit India.

It was not only André Malraux but a countless number of Western thinkers who saw India as a beacon of light for a troubled world. In his book, *The Story of Civilization*, Will Durant wrote, "India is the motherland of our race and Sanskrit is the mother of Indo-European languages. She is the mother of our philosophy, of our mathematics, mother of ideals embodied in Christianity and mother of our democracy. Mother India is in many ways the mother of us all." Arnold Toynbee, the British historian said, "It is already becoming clear that a chapter which had a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending, if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race. At this supremely dangerous moment in history, the only way of salvation for mankind is the age-old Indian way." That is because it so happens that what the world needs, for example, to overcome for climate crisis, is what the ancient Hindu civilization stood for: accent on needs, not wants, conservation over consumerism, living in harmony, not confrontation, with nature, and elevating thoughts like *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is one family). Gandhi voiced it well: "For my material needs my village is my world, but for my spiritual needs the whole world is my village." What is particularly relevant to the present times is reverence for nature.

We have not acquired the maturity and mellowness, resilience and balance required to take an unblinkered and unbiased look back at what happened in the life of this land and its people before our time as a launching pad for the future. Hindsight is not meant to settle present-day scores; it can be a balm to bind wounds. But what is distressing is

that, as David Frawley puts it, "There is probably no other country where it has become a national pastime among its educated class to denigrate its own culture and history, however great that has been over the many millennia of its existence."[24] The sad truth is that for a section of us, Indian culture continues to be synonymous with social evils, obsolete beliefs and nothing else. What does that tell us about who we are?

The future India doesn't have to be a carbon copy of past India or even of present India; but a sense of awareness is necessary to draw right lessons and to avoid the same mistakes. There is also little point in debating who, among the invaders, looted or did not; first of all, they didn't come here as Good Samaritans; the rest is a matter of degree. But to be apologetic where no apology is needed, and to dub any attempt to craft a new and more authentic historical frame of reference as 'historical revisionism' is further proof of 'negationism'. But care should be taken to see that it does not degenerate into 'hate-filled jingoism' as some fear is what is happening. That will amount to blatant betrayal of the very spirit of classical Hindu narrative, the spirit being that while there are several rituals and practices one should do, nothing in it suggests anything that harms or comes in the way of anyone else pursuing a different belief-system. That is the greatness as well as the vulnerability of Hinduism.

Consensus, dissent, and democratic decision-making

One thing is very clear: while consensus is the lifeblood of democracy, it has eluded Indian democracy. The *Artha-shastra* clearly spells this out: "Sovereignty is practicable only with the cooperation of others and all administrative

measures are to be taken after proper deliberations."[25] Consensus is not uniformity or unanimity; indeed, without diversity and differences there can be no consensus. Dissent is an important input into right decision-making; but it should not become an adamant veto arising out of vested interests or pressure groups. Ruling regimes have emasculated dissent by branding it as impudence and anti-national, and dissent itself has lost its spontaneity and idealism. While, on the one hand, the ruling parties have come to believe that mustering and managing votes in parliament is all that is needed for national policy-making, the Opposition and the vocal public have realized that every 'decision' or law can be overturned with enough pressure, publicity, and staying power on the street. That is why in a true democracy there is no victor or vanquished. A parliament can work only if a ruling party can imagine itself sitting on the other side as the opposition party, and the opposition, the reverse. In Indian 'democracy', the opposition almost reflexively accuses the government of arrogance and majoritarian authoritarianism, and the government accuses the opposition of opportunism and obstructionism. The upshot is that "A theoretical system of 'checks and balances' has lost all its balance; the only check being unruly conduct, obstructionist behavior and converting the parliament (or state assemblies) from being deliberative bodies to publicity platforms for perpetual campaigning. As for the governments, alas, the greatest check upon them is of their own incompetence."[26]

The net effect of all this is that, after 75 years of democratic functioning, we still have not settled into a genuinely democratic way of decision-making—how different interests and opinions of stakeholders are to be

aired and articulated passionately and vigorously, how to view and weigh them all in a transparently fair and just way, and how to carry decision-making forward consensually. It is also time to calmly reflect on the role of opposition parties in our quasi-federal structure. It is now clear that the days when any single party would be in power without the support of any other party, both at the center and in all states, are virtually over. A party (or part of a coalition) could be in power in one state, and find itself in the opposition in another state or at the center, or vice versa. Response to any governmental move has to be judged on its merits with the overall national interest as the backdrop. There should also be broad agreement on an issue, and decisions taken constitutionally must only be challenged in the manner prescribed by the Constitution. Sometimes, all laws, all conventions, all codes of conduct may have to be broken, but these must be rare exceptions, and that too to serve, generic national interests. A relatively recent but major cause of concern is that India has turned into a 'special interest state' and too often, much-needed reforms are held back or torpedoed by the interests of a vocal few at the cost of benefits that could accrue to the vast majority. As a society, we have just lost the ability to put the larger good ahead of the narrower benefit. Indeed, the domino effect began with the Constitution when, prompted by B.R. Ambedkar, it 'abandoned' the village, which symbolized collective interdependence, for the 'independent' individual.

When any individual views everything from the prism of '*what is in it for me?*', every other person becomes a competitor. Nothing then is taken at its face value; one looks for mala fide or hidden motives. There is no legitimacy even to the laws of the land. If it doesn't suit you, throw it away

or take to the streets. Parties in power are no better. They tend to think that having come to power electorally, they are anointed as monarchs and masters of the universe, free to use the might of the government as it feels fit, or to, as Shiv Visvanathan puts it, "promote monolingual politics."[27] Simply put, collectively as a community, we haven't learnt how to listen to dissent, how to arrive at synergic decisions, and how to take a 'no' for an answer for the common good. What we must relentlessly remember is that as 'rational' humans we are often the last ones to grasp the impacts of our actions, and that what we believe is correct might have unintended consequences, and could be divergent from what we think they are, and which only others can see. So, we would do well not to let our self-conceit get in the way of inviting and deeply considering feedback from others.

A former Chief Justice of India also observed recently, "What is the use of powerful debates if only people who are powerful are allowed to get their matters redressed and the common man's grievance is not addressed?"[28] Despite the prime minister frowning on the haughty 'VIP culture'—a peculiar Indian phenomenon—and ordering a symbolic removal of sirens from some minor VIP cars, the desire for power is well and truly entrenched in our psyche. Power and connections are instrumental in, say, obtaining the grant of bail as well as to getting comforts and conveniences in jail. That 'culture of impunity' manifests in another pernicious way. Anyone of any consequence, the affluent and the elite—and even more their children—grow up in India with the belief that they are beyond the law. And that if they violate the law, and commit even rape and murder, they will not be caught. In the rare case that they do get caught, they can escape the consequences. It is all a hangover of the

colonial era, but it is refreshingly absent in the colonizing power. The New Class of post-1947, the 'English-speaking aristocracy' of India, straightaway took over from the feudal overlords of the English era.

If India does become a 'great society', it will uplift the lives of one-seventh of humanity, triggering a world-wide shift from capitalist consumerism to a more balanced paradigm of growth, and decisively contribute to the definition of a climate-sensitive development model. And if it fails and falls by the wayside, it could fatally cripple global efforts to address common problems collectively. And if it turns from what the Prime Minister of India called the 'Mother of all Democracies' to a backsliding democracy—as some fear is already under way—then the cause of democracy world-wide will be dealt a crippling blow. Either way, India is an 'indispensable nation', if only in sheer numbers. It is expected to become the first country to be home to more than 1.5 billion people by 2030, and its population is set to reach 1.7 billion by 2050.[29] What happens to this huge mass of humanity will decisively shape the destiny of humanity. It is a challenge for both India and the world. India is an astounding repository of living patterns and modes of heritage. What is worth recording is that with its breathtaking diversity, and a rich tapestry of art, architecture, literature, music and dance, and several lifestyle paradigms, India represents the largest venture or experiment in democracy with a seamless sinew of diversity in unity, perhaps unparalleled anywhere, or anytime, in the history of the world. If the 'Indian experiment' fails, it will have seismic global repercussions.

The fact is that India is a nation to be reckoned with. Even what happens to India economically will carry global

implications. A hint of it is what the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in its *World Economic Outlook* (2020). It attributes the decline in global economic growth—2.9% for 2019, a downward revision of 0.1 percentage point from its earlier forecast—largely to downward revisions for India, particularly over rural income. Not only is India a 'consequential country', but even more tellingly, India's rural income, by its sheer size, has impacted overall global economic growth. The World Bank (2019) echoes this line and says that India is critical to the success of global development efforts, including eliminating extreme poverty, and as an influential leader for global challenges such as addressing climate change.

Has India missed the 'development' bus?

By any fair measure, India has had stellar accomplishments, but largely it is a mixed report card. On the one hand, India is ranked as the world's third-largest economy by purchasing power parity (PPP), and as the world's fifth-largest economy by nominal GDP, with a GDP about double the size of either Germany or Japan (both of which had economies larger than India's on a PPP basis in 2000).

On the other hand, in relation to per capita income in 2020, India's rank was 142 out of 197 countries. In terms of the 2022 United Nations SDG index—assessment of countries' progress towards achieving 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 3030—India ranks 121 out of 163 countries (it was ranked 117 in 2020, and 120 in 2021). India is not placed well to achieve the SDGs, and its preparedness has worsened over the years in comparison with other countries. According to the United

Nations Development Programme (UNDP), India lifted as many as 415 million people out of poverty in a 5-year time period from 2005/06 to 2019/21, but it still has 228.9 million people living in multidimensional poverty—that is, around 27.9% in absolute terms. India still has the highest number of poor children in the world (97 million, or 21.8% of children aged 0–17).

As a country, we have simply not risen to our fullest capability. We are seen as a 'big bully' by other developing countries, while the 'Big Boys', on the other hand, keep India at arm's length. The former Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (Chou en-Lai) is reported to have once said, "[India] puts on the airs of a big country, but sometimes it has an inferiority complex." The brag of being the world's biggest democracy, or the 'mother of democracies' cuts no ice, least of all in the so-called democratic world. Similarly, our oft-repeated self-congratulatory certificate that India, in all its history, never invaded another country elicits no respect; if any, it only goes to show how soft we are. Let us not forget that the so-called democratic world, which means the Western world, primarily the USA (not only the government but also its all-powerful corporate sector), preferred the totalitarian communist China to India, thus creating a monster. The world over, the broad perception of India has been of a country that has missed the bus, a country that has not managed to get its act together, and whose aspirations have not matched its achievements. Although efforts are now being made to correct that image, much still remains. It is brute power that matters in the world; not pious platitudes. Without that, we will elicit derision akin to Stalin scoffing at the Pope, "How many divisions has he got?" It is another matter that another

'division-less' person, John Paul II, triggered the collapse of communism in Poland! That apart, we remain a complex paradox. We are big but soft, and not strong enough to endure strain, pressure, or strenuous effort. We yield too easily—which makes us easy meat for anyone with ill will and sharp teeth.

Let us also bear in mind that, in spite of the popular presumption that India is blessed with plentiful natural resources, it has largely failed to fully exploit and effectively optimize what nature has endowed it with. Our country is critically short on minerals and materials of strategic importance. Our dependence on others undercuts our desire to command strategic respect internationally. India, despite being the second most populous nation in the world, does not even make the top ten countries in terms of natural resources. Even more distressing, we have not been able to make optimum use of what we have. Water—increasingly the most precious of the world's resources—is a good example. According to a study by the international think-tank *World Resources Institute* (WRI), of the 17 countries facing the highest level of water stress (where 80% of water available is used up annually) India receives the maximum annual rainfall. Arguably one of, if not the greatest, indictment of post-independent India is monsoon management. We must not forget that the monsoon is nature's gift to India, while we treat it as a calamity to cope with. What is beyond any alibi is that year after year we scramble to get our act together about something that provides 75% of our total annual precipitation, on which the country's economic outlook so heavily hinges, and this on a phenomenon so unerringly regular and surgically predictable. More often than not, the onset of the monsoon

is treated like an earthquake; we are taken by surprise, and mount relief operations, unmindful of how much of our ultimate resource is squandered.

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Taking Stock, Before We Look Ahead

The dilemma for the world is that India can't be left to stew in its own juice, to pay for its sins of commission and omission like many others. If India remains a poor, underdeveloped nation, starved of capital and knowhow, it will be detrimental to global stability. India's contribution to a better world is not only an economic, or geostrategic necessity; it is even more critical for the spiritual advancement of mankind. Although modernity has robbed much of it, that hoary tradition is part of the soil and air of India, and is eternal and indestructible. India's customs and traditions are much too deep to be trampled or uprooted by any onslaught or upheaval or even betrayal. And India being true to India's original values and traditions is overwhelmingly for the good of the wounded soul of the world. Unfortunately, our shared values are dwindling away to the point we may have none. Before the world can take a good look at how to partner with India in this adventure, we Indians everywhere must do some honest stock-taking.

India's ruin: imperialism and depredation

To get a clear picture of where India now is, it is necessary to widen the time-frame, and go back beyond the number of 75 and include the effect of two centuries of British colonial

rule. The share of the social, economic, and psychological ruin of India under British imperialism is integral to what is amiss with India even now. As Shashi Tharoor summed up so well, "What had once been one of the richest and most industrialized economies of the world, which together with China accounted for almost 75% of world industrial output in 1750, had been reduced by the depredations of imperial rule to one of the poorest, most backward, illiterate, and diseased societies on earth by the time of independence in 1947."[30]

The historian William Dalrymple has put it this way: "The economic figures speak for themselves. In 1600, when the East India Company was founded, Britain was generating 1.8% of the world's GDP, while India was producing 22.5%. By the peak of the Raj, those figures had more or less been reversed: India was reduced from the world's leading manufacturing nation to a symbol of famine and deprivation."[31]

A new study by Dylan Sullivan and Jason Hickel with Australian, Spanish, and UK universities argues that "British colonialism killed 100 million Indians."[32] This figure is larger than the combined number of deaths from both World Wars, including the Nazi Holocaust. The fact remains that Britain was 'double-faced' in its approach domestically and externally. Pearl S. Buck once quipped that "Britain is a democracy fighting for its empire."[33] It was a 'model democracy' at home, and the 'murderer of democracy' in its colonies. As Walter Reid notes, Britain held back political progress in India for as long as possible.[34] That was because Britain knew that without its crown jewel, India, it would be a third-rate power. Its strong reluctance to let India go and the hasty exit, led to unimaginable chaos and suffering

when Independence was granted, and created a legacy of hatred and bitterness that continues to haunt the region to this day. Since then, a psychological chasm has arisen between Hindus and Muslims; the spirit of bonhomie has given away to wariness and watchfulness.

The question no one has been able to answer is why did Indians let such obscenity and murderous rampage happen for so long so meekly or complicitly? What kind of human breed are we? Why were there no mass protests, and why were the British masters allowed to lead leisurely, luxurious lives, partying, club-hopping, unafraid of ambushes, reprisals, assassinations, and revenge? The comforting lie we have been telling ourselves was that brute force or clever cunning ruled over a hapless people. The inconvenient truth was that what most Indians offered was not any kind of passionate or even passive 'resistance', but a blend of active and resigned 'acceptance'. As Tolstoy pointed out in his '*A Letter to a Hindu*',[35] the contents of which inspired Gandhi,[36] "More than two hundred million people, highly gifted both physically and mentally, find themselves in the power of a small group of people quite alien to them in thought, and immeasurably inferior to them in religious morality… A commercial company enslaved a nation comprising two hundred million. Tell this to a man free from superstition and he will fail to grasp what these words mean… Do not the figures make it clear that not the English, but the Indians, have enslaved themselves?"

Harsh words coming from a man hailed by Mahatma Gandhi as "the greatest apostle of nonviolence that the present age has produced." Truth is that he was right then, and even more now. What is intriguing was that Tolstoy attributes it to the "absence of a religious consciousness

and of the guidance for conduct which should flow from it." What is somewhat intriguing is that India was always a deeply religious country; its leader Gandhi was one such. Tolstoy was presumably aware of it. Does it mean that 'being religious' is different from having a 'religious consciousness'?

To bolster what Tolstoy said, one must remember that in their entire rule, the British made up no more than 0.05% of the population. It is true to say that we gifted India to the English, rather than say that 'India was lost'. The hatchet men and henchmen were Indians. The policemen who beat up the *satyagrahis* were Indians; the magistrates who convicted them, and the jailers who kept Gandhi and others in prison were Indians; the clerks and peons, and even some Imperial Police (IP) officers,[37] who ran the government offices, were Indians; the soldiers who massacred 379 Indians at Jallianwala Bagh (13 April 1919), under the orders of Colonel Dyer, were mostly fellow-Indians. Can that be justified on the plea that they were doing their professional *swadharma*? But as Gandhi, in his trial for sedition, pointed out, it was a "virtue to be disaffected towards a government which in its totality had done more harm to India than any previous system."

In reality, the Brits counted on the 'sullen complicity' of the silent majority and even more, on the 'unflinching loyalty' of Indian soldiers to hold on to India for that long with so sparse a British presence. And there is now evidence that tends to suggest that the British finally knew they had to pack their bags and depart India, when after the Second World War and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army and the Red Fort trials, they were no longer sure of that 'loyalty'. So, India owes its liberation

not only to Gandhi's satyagraha, but also to Netaji and to the Indian sepoys. We can even speculate that while the first Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 led to the dissolution of the East India Company followed by direct rule by the British Crown, it was the dire possibility of a second rebellion, far more serious and with much more popular support, that might have panicked war-enfeebled Britain.

Unbelievably, it is a fact that even the Congress Party did not ask for '*poorna swaraj*' or full independence till as late as 1930. It was dominion status that was sought; which means we wanted self-governance, not sovereignty. We wanted autonomy, not independence. Such was the hold of the British over the Indian mind. Ironically, although Nehru declared otherwise, factually, on 15 August 1947, India actually became a dominion: a constitutional monarchy with King George VI (styled the 'King of India'). The fact is that few Indians, even Gandhi, much less Nehru, had any burning antipathy for the intruder who ravaged and plundered their dear homeland. They really did not mind the British if only India could be free! Furthermore, as Pavan Varma puts it, "Nehru's view of India's past was of dismissal and impatience, an impediment to India's push for progress and modernity. In this sense, he was a product of colonial prejudice, and had internalized—like so many others of the anglicized elite—the superficial but deliberate disdain of Indian culture, and specifically Hindu civilization."[38]

Strained… but holding

If Otto von Bismarck, who, through a series of wars unified 39 individual states into one German nation (1871), was

celebrated as a master tactician and a great statesman, what should one say of Sardar Patel, the then Deputy Prime Minister of India, who peacefully and almost single-handedly, united over 560 'sovereign states' into a single sovereign nation? Several 'states' predictably did want to remain 'independent', but Patel cajoled them to prevail on them to fall in line. In no other nation or era has integration of such a vast population, comprising such diverse people, taken place within such a short span of time. The lingering problem of Kashmir is one bitter consequence of this legacy.

The miracle is that India still holds and that it managed to integrate the French- and Portuguese-ruled pockets in India. Pakistan broke into two, with the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. And again, unlike Pakistan, India has had no coups, save one 'constitutional coup' in 1975, staged not by a general, but by an incumbent prime minister, Indira Gandhi. That the coup failed is a testament to the resilience of the Indian democracy. India, and the world, witnessed the awesome spectacle of millions of people patiently participating and contributing to the *sine qua non* of democracy—the peaceful transition of power, through as many as 17 general elections. In these elections, the people changed the ruling party or combination of parties *eight* times. We take elections for granted now. But when India became independent and chose universal adult suffrage, there were many doubts and fears from many quarters. At that moment in history, universal adult suffrage was variously termed a giant leap forward, a risky enterprise, an unparalleled adventure. That was the time when 84% of Indians were illiterate, an equal number in poverty living in an unequal society fractured by a caste-based hierarchical system. The faith of the founders in the lay public, in one sense, paid off.

Although Indira Gandhi's Emergency was mercifully short-lived, it revealed two things: on the one hand, it showed how easy it is to constitutionally subvert the Constitution and, on the other hand, it showed that even iconic autocrats crave democratic legitimacy. There again, the electorate 'punished' Indira by the ballot box even in her own constituency. And when the successor Janata Government made a hash of its opportunity, they voted Indira back to power, again by the ballot box… That was a watershed in Indian normative democracy. Time and time again, even in retrospect, the final result of each of the general elections stands out as right and correct. The number of registered voters in the 2019 general election stood at a stupendous 911 million.

Indian democracy, during the recent decades, has been under perceptible stress, with the collapse of what Rajni Kothari called the 'Congress system'.[39] The emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the dominant political force in the country, and regional parties coming to power in several key states, indicate how strong people's roots are in their language, culture, and ethnicity. The BJP is trying to extend its popular base in every state, even where its allies are in power, and regional parties seeing that as a threat to their very legitimacy and fighting back, and inevitably, it has worsened center-state relations. The rise of what we might call 'regional restiveness' has also exacerbated this trend. Regional parties, actually family-held, private companies, 'are coming to power, with their own agenda, often entailing conflict with the party in power at the center'. Being 'regional' they can easily arouse and satiate popular passions and respond to the narrow linguistic, cultural, and indigenous aspirations of the people. Some

political leaders might not hesitate to play that card even if they are not fully committed. The danger of a clash of resurgent regionalism versus nebulous nationalism cannot be underestimated. Indeed, that is a higher risk factor than, as some Left-wing pundits fear, 'Hindu nationalism' breaking up India. Here again, we should not brand 'regionalism' per se as bad, or equally that 'nationalism' is good. If tomorrow India is divided into ten countries, what is now 'regionalism' becomes nationalism. This brings into the open the question of Indian 'nationhood'. In India, there is at present a nascent sense of nationality and the feeling of nationalism (the emotional, not rational, longing to 'belong' to each other) which is weak. That makes us fragile internally and vulnerable externally.

The disturbing reality is that India's proud tradition of civility, courtesy, and acceptance is taking a beating, partly due, ironically, to one of the pillars of democracy: that the citizens decide, entirely of their own will, who among them should or will be entrusted with the formal and legal authority to perform basic tasks of government in their name and with their sovereign legitimacy. Over a short stretch of seventy plus years, it has gotten rotten and we have pretty much sacrificed our permissive and progressive past at the altar of what democracy has come to entail.

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2

Moral Decline and Mediocrity – the Deadweights Dragging India Down

India's Dismal Moral Drift

Any candid reflection and intrepid introspection of what really ails India must—if we are truly honest—lead us to its fountainhead. The greatest failure of India since independence, reflected in its constitutional scheme, political system, economic performance, social insensitivity, and ethical indecency, is our state of moral faltering, failure, and fall.

The breakdown of morality inevitably affects performance, productivity and social values and norms. Instead of acknowledging and introspecting on the contours and causes of our moral decay and degeneration, we have been looking for scapegoats and doormats like religion, caste, class, and constitution. But the source is the same; they are but its outward expressions and extensions and emanations. Immorality clouds and corrupts our senses and sense organs and mind. Our system of rewards and recognition, adulation and imitation, reflects this noxious nimbus. For anyone growing up in India, their role models are, more often than not, those with questionable morals. How then can society be any better?

Part of the reason why there is so much conflict in India is because we are treating, to rephrase Swami Vivekananda, 'diversity as weakness, not a source of creativity'. Such a state of consciousness has been there for so long that we don't even act as if we know that is wrong. In this perspective, it is not a case of 'failure'; it is a case of 'duplicity' and 'willful blindness'; a refusal to face the truth rather than lack of knowledge. It includes walking away from an atrocity at our very doorstep. It is now becoming a sickening and all-too-normal occurrence in our cities. We all bemoan that tendency but we are all, in different ways, accessories. That is why no one feels a sense of shame. If the moral conscience of society in general and our peers in particular is not shocked, why would anyone feel otherwise? It is this 'noxious nonchalance', this absence of 'reflexive empathy' that has incapacitated our social fabric. That gets reinforced by another disturbing phenomenon: instinctive reluctance 'to get involved' in any 'trouble', for fear of getting 'into trouble' ourselves. It has distorted how we view, treat, and trust each other.

Distrust leads to disillusionment and disbelief. Few, if any, believe that government is run for the benefit of all the people. Everyone's bona fides are to be doubted as a default option. No one and nothing is taken at face value; the prima facie assumption is that everyone is lying. This is especially apodictic at election time. For, as someone quipped, "These days, the only time politicians tell the truth is when they call each other a liar." Among the three principal wings of Indian government—judiciary, legislature, and executive—each assumes that the other two will misuse their powers and try to put in place policies and measures to pre-empt its actions. The magical mantra to obviate misuse is to divest

an agency of its power, even constitutional, and institute a committee or a commission as a substitute. That creates more redundancy, layers, procedures and paperwork. It is the populist distrust of the executive that the judiciary, itself no angel or saint, seizes upon to thrust itself into executive matters, gravely jeopardizing the constitutional balance of power. One cannot blame it on the judiciary alone; when an opportunity opens up, few will resist using it. It is partly to offset the 'distrust' that everyone wants the opposite—power, the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events. And that has much to do with, although we scarcely realize, low morals. This brings to mind what Albert Camus once said: "When moral decline creeps into even the tiniest capillaries of society, all that is left is 'power'." (*The Human Crisis*, 1946).

Political parties are expected to perform as a platform for social forces that need advocacy and attention, but instead they have become hostage to entrenched classes and vested interests. The upshot is that governance in India is based not on its impact on the country but how it may affect a particular group of the population. The polluted political process has not only contributed in no small measure to the moral decay of Indian society, but it can even, according to Joseph Tainter (*The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 1988), lead to societal collapse caused by 'the destruction and decay of social organizations and institutions'.

Every institution or individual in power can, and does, misuse its/his powers. We need both trust and integrity in the public sphere. What is troubling is that, after 75 years of living as citizens of a free country, the attribute that is most deficient in public life is integrity in its

widest reach. As a people, our integrity lags far behind our intellect. As Jaswant Singh noted, "That 'integration' is not possible without 'integrity', and post-independence India, after the heady early years, has lacked conviction about a central 'integrity'."[1] Integrity implies trustworthiness and incorruptibility to a degree that one is incapable of being false to a trust, responsibility, or pledge. Ironically, unlike the West, India is a 'high-trust' society; that is how cheating becomes so easy.

That all power corrupts is all evident in India. At the center, the political executive misuses the permanent executive and what are called 'central agencies', which in theory are autonomous but in practice act at the behest of the political executive, particularly of the prime minister. The states 'misuse' their political powers by cancelling or defying laws passed by the parliament for partisan purposes. The judiciary misuses its powers through 'atavistic' overreach of its constitutional authority, and gets away with a brazen denial of any role for an elected government under a democratic constitution or any say whatsoever in the appointment of judges.[2] People 'misuse' their sovereign powers by electing those they know are not fit to represent them. The government does not trust the opposition, and the opposition thinks obstructing whatever the government wants to do is the way to enhance their credibility. The center does not trust the states and vice versa. Politicians do not trust the bureaucracy and vice versa. People do not trust their representatives, and the latter gladly returns the complement. Politicians cannot even anymore 'trust' that a bribe really gets a vote.

What is singular to India is that our very democracy is hijacked and is hostage to money power. It has subordi-

nated every other civic value and sensitivity. One of the much-quoted verses in Chanakya's *Arthashastra* says, not approvingly but realistically, that *dhanam moolam idam jagath*—'the world revolves around money'. That was said two millennia ago. Such gems in other scriptures, such as the *Manusmriti*, are often ignored: "The man who is unrighteous, he whose wealth is miss-begotten, and he who is always addicted to injuring, never obtains happiness."

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The Rot of Mediocrity

In love with mediocrity

It is clear that India today stands at the crossroads. It is a miracle that it still survives as a democratic, pluralistic and progressive nation-state. Underlying all its political, economic, social and religious afflictions is a moral malaise and a breakdown of ethical values. In the contemporary age of mediocrity and mechanization worldwide, it is worthwhile to pause and examine why India often emerges as synonymous with mediocrity in the eyes of many.

We Indians seem to be so much at home with 'our virtuous love for mediocrity'[3] that we do not want to even acknowledge that we were ever any better than who and what we had been for a while. Probably, the people of this land found comfort in the thought that "this is how our collective *karma* made us—so accept it, endure it, and be

contented." Such a psyche was the price that Indians (which virtually meant Hindus) paid for countless generations, under the foreign yoke. V.S. Naipaul, for one, thinks that this was because of the Indic civilization being subjected to recurring invasions including the Islamic conquest.[4] But the broader question that he did not address is how *that* was allowed to occur; not only did the Indic civilization allow itself to be conquered but also to be occupied for long stretches, including, to rub salt into the wound, occupation by a trading company. Does that have anything to do with the dharmic nature of Hindu civilization? After all—the Hindu mind could have reasoned—if every human, indeed every sentient being is the personification of God, how does it matter who the ruler is? It is more than the much-used phrase 'colonial mindset', or mentality.

If our very inner self and ego are such, how can we even entertain the thought that we were, and still could be, a society of high quality, mettle, and value? It took a while to understand its grip on the Indian subconscious, but its recognition got translated into our Constitution via the 42nd Amendment: "To strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity so that the nation constantly rises to higher levels of endeavor and achievement" was made one of the 'Fundamental Duties'. It need hardly be said that like all other 'duties' this too went out of the window. Prime Minster Narendra Modi remarked, "We also have to admit that in the 75 years after Independence, a malaise has afflicted our society, our nation and all of us. It is that we turned away from our duties and did not give them primacy. In the last 75 years, we only kept talking about rights, fighting for rights, and wasting our time. The issue of rights may be right to

some extent in certain circumstances, but neglecting one's duties completely has played a huge role in keeping India vulnerable."[5] In fact, over-emphasizing rights and ignoring duties, the malaise the prime minister referred to is itself a sign of what we may call mutual mediocrity. When it is mutual, nobody complains, or even takes notice. Mediocrity made us soft, made us look for short-cuts and quick-fixes, and to aim for minimal effort and maximal gain; in other words, it was all rights and no duties.

After the singularly unified fight for freedom—a non-violent movement for independence at a scale hitherto unseen in world history—the fledgling nation's history scripted a rude and unexpected turn: the individual excellence of our founding fathers lost out to the strong partisan attitudes lying just under the skin of a newly unified country. Was it this hidden but powerful streak of mediocrity that resulted in a hotch-potch constitution? Where were the descendants of once-great indigenous kingdoms? Where was the unparalleled scholarship that this land became known for the world over even a millennium ago? Did our collective moral decadence set in during a specific period, or was it inherent to the nature of our people? Unless we, the people of India today, take careful stock of the stupendous extent of the rot, there is little hope of wiping the overwhelming ignominy. It is time our collective consciousness is awakened, beginning, perhaps, with Gen Z, the *avant garde* of our precarious future.

Chalta hai—shackled to the 'second class'

Truly, the sinister shadow of the mediocre mindset has sunk so deep that even after 75 years of freedom, India is

still shackled. Like a slave who even with a choice to be free chooses to keep serving the master, we have clung to the smug safety of 'second-class' mentality. We got addicted to the ill-treatment for so long that it got embedded in our persona and psyche, attitude and aptitude, sense of success and failure, as a result of which India is now well and truly 'comfortably' suffocating like a spider in the web of mediocrity, loving every minute of it. What is required is a psychological mutation to truly get rid of this mindset. Everything we do in life for a prolonged period makes us who we are, most of all education. Mediocrity has infected the whole system and, among other things, affected our capacity to translate policies into programs, and programs into performance. Lant Pritchett expressed it succinctly: "India's very capable head is no longer reliably connected to the arms and legs of implementation."[6]

We are mediocre in performance but not in cheating. Every scheme, intended to benefit the masses, is subverted, even in seemingly foolproof programs, and 'middle-men' even within the government service take their 'cut' before clearing files. There is a massive divergence between *de jure* and *de facto* reality. Mediocrity stalks every walk of life in India. Many of us in India never live the way we want to. We seem to be condemned forever to being a muddling nation, always around the fringe, never on the peak. Mediocrity is not imperfection, because we don't even know what 'perfection' could be. No one is 'mediocre' in relation to another person; we are mediocre in relation to what we could be.

In consequence, as Gautam Bhatia puts it, "To say that we live in a time of mediocrity is to give mediocrity a bad name. We aspire to very little, we are satisfied with

nothing, and we live without expectation."[7] Mediocrity is institutionalized in India, and shows up as our '*chalta-hai*' attitude—sloppiness and laxity at the workplace, and the general shoddy quality of goods and services. That is reinforced by the '*maa-baap*' culture, wherein the poor or the powerless bend backwards to please political masters, hoping that the latter would throw some crumbs their way. Foreign investors and companies complain that Indian businessmen don't understand the concept of good faith in negotiations. Legal agreements are regularly flouted, often in cahoots with the bureaucracy. It also makes us feel safe. In the words of Montesquieu, "Mediocrity is a handrail". Another debilitating effect of mediocrity is that it promotes conformity and compliance. We proudly extol our diversity but shun its counterpart, dissent, and seek safety in the mediocrity of uniformity.

As a consequence, governance all around us is based on how it may affect a particular community. No wonder then that the Indian society as a whole is now stuck in the quagmire of mediocrity. Worse, we excuse it by self-righteously denying it. Instead of acknowledging and facing up to that as a collective condition, we keep blaming the individual components and bemoan the fall in the standards of our political class, administrative machinery, judicial system and public ethics and moral standards. We live, even thrive, in a milieu of injustice, but at the same time grumble and express affected indignation.

One reason why we consistently and invariably fail is because we cannot achieve constancy in quality; as James Collins said, "The signature of mediocrity is chronic inconstancy."[8] And since 'mediocrity is excellence to mediocre people', we don't factor in mediocrity in

planning, project formulation, and schedules of execution. We don't factor in mediocrity because we don't admit we are mediocre—to overcome which we need other safeguards—and that is why we always fall behind schedules. Worse, we excuse it by saying 'this is India'; almost saying, 'what else can you expect?' What is tragic is that India, perhaps more than any other country, has what it takes to be a land of great creativity and lofty excellence. Ancient India had given birth to not only great spiritual masters but it has been home to the highest intellect, unrivalled anywhere else. With such innate capability and a peerless past, why do the Indians of the day so easily settle for mediocrity?

Critical thinking: is it a waste of our time?

It is not as if Indians don't want excellence or greatness; they just want a free lunch. We aspire for 'eminence' without striving for excellence. Worse, we identify it with elitism. We explain away our failings with qualifications such as 'in the circumstances', and 'reasonably good'. The simple point is that if you don't do a job well, that is, with excellence, you don't enjoy doing it, and that has a spin-off effect. We get easily satisfied with meagre results, because, in our own mind, that is all there is. We shrink from the sacrifices that attaining excellence calls for. Not being dissatisfied with our 'achievements' since independence, political and economic, is a symptom of our reluctance to go the extra mile, of our middle-of-the-road aspirations. Yet, it is not as if excellence is wholly absent from India; there have been pockets here and there, and it shows itself from time to time.

Out-of-the-box thinking, offering honest advice, and sticking one's neck out if something is brazenly wrong,

is asking for trouble. We prefer deference, and scowl at difference. We are unwilling to hear anything that we don't like: advice which points out different implications in decision-making is frowned upon. Sane voices fall silent in the process. Virtually all meaningful 'decisions' that affect the people of India are taken within the government, partly because there is a dearth of non-governmental 'think tanks'. Indeed, there is virtually no unblinkered and unprejudiced and unapologetic public discourse in India. What parades as public intelligentsia is both minuscule and malleable, predictable and prejudiced. They are opinion-makers but are often opinionated. They are supposed to explain things, but often they explain away. They are also mostly of the kind that Noam Chomsky referred to, when he said, 'The respected intellectuals are those who conform and serve power interests." In other words, they too, like the rest of us, are morally mediocre but more influential. This is the paradox and an unending tragedy. In a democracy, the role of a public intellectual is crucial. Instead of 'public', we can put down 'paid'; and for 'intellectual', 'ignorant' might well do. There are many 'intelligent people' in India but few 'intellectuals' whose opinions we can unquestioningly add up while forming our own opinion. We have a plethora of 'highly educated' people with sharp skills of analysis, who can hold their ground in any global platform, but much of their output is mostly run-of-the-mill and rarely exceptional, a rough cut-and-paste work, not constructively creative. Much of what they put out is heavily doctored and dense, calling into mind what Oscar Wilde quipped, "to be intelligible is to be found out." They are all part of the 'English elite' and are fractured into 'left-wing' and 'right-wing'. For some, 'intellectual' itself is synonymous with 'liberal, left-wing'.

This bias is one of the reasons why there is a broad belief that many of the 'intellectuals' are fake, that they live in ivory towers, that they are 'paid puppeteers' of a political party or of power-hungry corporations, and that they are part of the oligarchy. They make a good living, write newspaper columns and books, and speak on TV shows, but they are all politically and ideologically predictable. In other words, we can't take them entirely on their word. Translated differently, they lack integrity. One should however hasten to add 'just like any of us'. The difference is that what the rest of us say does not have the ripple effect. The result is shrinking space for public intellectuals and critical thinking, eroding their moral legitimacy, public utility and credibility to perform the role of incubators of ideas. In short, many of them have become morally suspect and mediocre. Serious people don't take seriously what these people say. That leaves a gaping chasm; ordinary citizens cannot look up to anyone in the public domain to act as the supporter and guardian of civic freedoms.

The dearth of authentic 'endogenous intellectual inputs' has impacted the quality of decisions and formulation of national policies. This factor should be borne in mind when making any assessment of 'India at 75'. What is so tragic is that India has had a rich tradition of producing great and original thinkers who have contributed to the creation of novel schools of thought that have traversed and found homes far beyond Indian shores. With such eminent heritage, what turned India into a land without any appetite for excellence is beyond comprehension. Even our imagination and inspiration is run-of-the-mill. That is why "India is a country with enormous potential… in a sense, our failure has been to be imaginative enough to harness that potential."[9]

It follows then that it is not 'contentment'—itself a great virtue and almost sacred—that is to be blamed for our mediocrity. Life is anyway unfair and no one knows why. There is no way to measure how much one is 'entitled' to in life, fairly and justly, commensurate with one's effort. Being satisfied with who you are and what you are makes life that much easier. What is unhealthy is to obtain satisfaction without a heart-and-soul effort. And contentment is bad if that leads to passivity in the face of being taken advantage of. Everyone asks '*why not me?*' when it comes to sharing the spoils of the system, but not '*why me?*' when it comes to standing up or showing the hand. On the other hand, 'being backward' is much-coveted badge for preferential treatment, given our highly faulty system of reservations for the needy classes. The rush to go to the bottom is a never-ending one, and there is often fierce competition to be classified as backward for the sake of reservations that end up encouraging mediocrity.

Mediocrity affects our ability to put all our might behind what we do. We just cannot connect the dots. Arjuna, the hero of the *Mahabharata*, while aiming his arrow to hit a bird on a tree, put all his concentration on striking just the eye of the bird. But for an average Indian of our time, such focused effort is not the norm; instead, 'why bother' is the dominant refrain. The instinct is to go for the easy option.

Plainly put, the plateau is our place of preference—not the peak. Our bar for achievement is so low that we celebrate even below-par performance. The 'performer' actually thinks he or she has reached the pinnacle. Worse, doing something out of the morass of the ordinary or exceptional is often tantamount to putting one's neck

on the line. People feel safe when everyone around them is at the same listless level as they are. What compounds the situation is that as human beings we are susceptible to what our 'role models' do and tell us. But what we are daily inundated with are reminders of mediocrity: "The movie star's opinion on trade, the minister's opinion on art, the journalist's view of nuclear energy, the cricketer's on corruption, the bureaucrat's participation in the literary festival…"[10] What else can we expect if we are left defenseless against "the daily dose of political rot meted out by the media, the incessant air waves and sound bites of mediocre men who control and charge the atmosphere with daily venom"?[11]

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Mediocrity's Queer Indian Pitch

It is worth looking at the worlds of cricket and cinema in India: both are icons and obsessions; both occupy a huge slice of the national sources of attention and entertainment in India. In a startling story of late 2022, when a particular cricketer was involved in a serious road accident, a national newspaper carried it as the lead headline of the next day's edition, and the prime minister thought it fit to call the cricketer's mother and offer support. This is simply unimaginable in any other sport or in any other walk of life in India. What is even more notable is that everyone thought it was normal and expected. There was no surprise or even a murmur when a cricketer became

the only sportsman ever to be awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award, an honor not even given to the hockey wizard Dhyan Chand, who won three Olympic gold medals for India. The country won an astounding eight gold medals in hockey, but it is now almost mediocre, partly because of all the glory going to cricket. Such is the hold of cricket on the Indian psyche. Amartya Sen says that of all the achievements that Britain claims are its lasting legacy, cricket is the only one where there was no gap between 'theory and practice'.[12] The implication was that it was an 'achievement'—although with hindsight, somewhat mixed, if not blighted.

In India, role models and celebrities—two distinct categories—are invariably clubbed together. They are all almost entirely drawn either from the film industry or from the world of Indian cricket. This speaks volumes about India's dismal drift in ethics and aesthetics. What speaks more about their impact is how they use their enormous influence in shaping public tastes and personal morals (particularly of the youth). Essentially, they use it to cash in on their popularity and make more money.

Is this cricket?

Cricket is dubbed as the 'sport that unites the nation within India', a 'religion'; it is more like an obsessive fixation. Cricket is the principal source of betting (estimated at around 80–90% of all sports betting). It is played not only on grounds and pitches but on every other street in the country. No gender and age can keep people away from playing the game. The game can be watched everywhere in the country, be it shops, streets, parking slots, society compounds, etc.

Cricket is a microcosm of India, and it comes with the quirky package of games of power, political and corporate clout, manipulation and maneuvering, sleaze, betting, and mafia. India's love affair with cricket has become so deeply ingrained that we don't mind if cricketers are treated as commodities to be sold at a cattle auction. It has virtually obliterated other sports like hockey, *kabbadi*, *kushti*, etc. Even international sports like tennis, badminton, soccer have not escaped its effect even though we are 'Westernized'. India winning the kabbadi world cups received nowhere near the accolades that marked cricket world cup triumphs. To put it in perspective, unlike other sports like soccer, cricket is played only by a handful of countries, and even here we struggle despite it being played by millions.

Cricket came to India through a British ship way back in 1721. In that way, India had cricket longer than the British Raj. Ashis Nandy quipped that cricket is an Indian game 'accidentally discovered by the British'. It has been called 'the mirror to the nation' and a unifier like nothing else, not even its closest rival, Bollywood. India's acceptance, adoration, and subsequent addiction to cricket also 'mirrors' our obsequious fascination for everything British. It has virtually turned India into a one-sport nation. Like all other legacies, including the English language, this too is a mixed bag. It has given pleasure to over a billion people, many of whom know very little of the game itself, but its effect on the Indian psyche is troubling. It has dwarfed all other sports. The result is that even the one game, hockey, in which India won an astonishing eight Olympic gold medals (the last in 1980) has lost its sheen. With so much talent, funding, such a large pool and fanatical following and fanfare, and with such luscious

rewards and fringe benefits, we should be fielding nothing less than *four* world-class teams.

As journalist and author Shekhar Gupta puts it, "India's bane is our easy embrace of mediocrity —from academia and science to business and military power. Sport is an apt metaphor."[13] And our performance in sports is so shockingly poor that it is mind-boggling and indeed inexplainable. There is not a single sport or athletic event where we are consistently Number One, or even close, when actually one of seven human beings on earth is an Indian. Tiny nations, smaller than many states in India, are able to make their mark, but not India. We have become a one-sport nation—deifying cricket—and even there we are not world champions. When much smaller cricket-playing countries like England and Australia are able to play and dominate in several sports besides cricket, why not we? The reason is simple: we virtually consign every other game to oblivion, and playing professionally any game other than cricket, is playing with obscurity and penury. As Shekhar Gupta puts it, "There's been some conversation lately around a medals-per-capita wealth ranking for nations, and India makes the bottom of that list. If you do a similar ranking of patents per capita, our vast population of engineers, science graduates or even PhDs will also place us somewhere at the bottom."[14] One of our sports greats, and a cofounder of *Olympic Gold Quest* (an organization committed to bridging the gap between the best athletes in India and the best athletes in the world) Prakash Padukone said it all: "No other nation focuses on bronze or silver as much as India does… let there be a difference between bronze and gold… this mindset must change if we are to aim higher."[15] While such a viewpoint may be 'going against the grain', as

Padukone himself said, that is indeed the annoying reality. The 'mindset' that Padukone referred to is, of course, none other than 'mediocrity'.

Indian cinema and world cinema

Similar is our record in another national obsession: *films*. India produces the most number of movies in the world, between 1,500 to 2,000 every year, in over 20 languages. Many of them are not even mediocre; they are shockingly shoddy, vulgar, and violent, and specifically designed to draw out the worst in us. But they do perform a useful function that we must acknowledge. In a country where hundreds of millions are so wearied, worn out, and lead lives shorn of any joy or happiness, these movies offer what Lee Child said about the purpose of fiction: "To give people what they don't get in real life."[16] They are an easy escape into wish-fulfilling fantasy. The more dreary, careworn, coarse, gross, ribald, and brutal they are, the more they can relate with the dreary and careworn lives of our masses. While we should not lightly dismiss this utilitarian aspect, it should still be possible to make at least a hatful of top-of-the-line movies. Movies are a tremendous source of projecting India's 'soft power', they take the Indian narrative forward and lift the mood of the nation. After all, Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) was a ruthlessly raw, unapologetically unsentimental and down-to-earth movie—Nargis Dutt branded it as 'exporting poverty'—and still was of cinematic excellence. When the BBC put out a list of the 100 best foreign language films of all time, culled from a poll of 200 critics from 43 countries, Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* was the only film from India to make

the list. Finally, in 2023, *The Elephant Whisperers* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Film at the 95th Academy Awards, making it the first Indian film to win an Academy Award in that category at the Oscars. It is another matter that, simultaneously, the film *RRR*'s song *Naatu Naatu* won the Oscar for 'Best Original Song' at the same ceremony. Needless to say, the crowds back at home were euphoric, while the film itself was a far cry from the creative brilliance of Satyajit Ray's magnum opus. As Ruchir Sharma observes, "So what explains the relatively poor quality of Indian cinema? Movies flow from popular culture, and ours is obsessed with the cult of celebrity to an extent that corrodes quality. In no other major film industry do the leading stars command a larger slice of movie budgets, leaving producers short on money for scripts, editing, and the rest of the arts that make a great film. Scripts are often written more to showcase a star than to tell a story, and that largely explains why so many of our pictures leave international critics cold… For this to change, more folks in the domestic film industry would need to recognize this mediocrity for what it is, and to feel a burning desire to produce world-class content."[17] Here again the malaise is the same: mediocrity. One follows the 'formula', and remains averse to risk-taking… As Gautam Bhatia points out, 'The troubling aspect of the Indian approach to excellence is the absence of sustained nurturing… outside of cricket and films, when was the last time a great musician, a painter, or inventor rose into our world? Individually we are capable of excellence; but collectively mediocre'.

In many ways, we are what we see, and movies do reflect and affect the viewers' way of thought and behavior.

There is no other country where people are as close to their cinema as we are. Movies have a profound influence on how we live and love, weep and laugh, dress and make our hair. It is money that drives the film-makers, although there is evidence that quality movies, bereft of the 'formula', do make money at the box office. For an already stressed-out people looking for a way to take their mind off their daily drudgery, films offer a cheap getaway. The reality is that "The majority of Indians are still dirt poor and fairly uneducated. Their lives are so miserably wanting in material and ideological wealth, that beyond the vicarious pleasures derived from a glimpse into the lives of the rich—the mere act of going to a movie-hall and experiencing the stars, up close and personal on the big screen—adds volumes to their confidence and street-cred."[18]

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Mediocrity and Education (or the lack of it)

The basic flaw and the consequent bane of our education system has been that it disconnects us from our own roots, from the reality of India. As former CJI Justice N.V. Ramana opined, "True education is one which imbibes moral values and virtues of humility, discipline, selflessness, compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, and mutual respect."[19] True, these values are a necessary part of 'right' upbringing, but if these are all that one learns in school and college, how will the national workforce have the technical skills necessary for nation building?

We cannot fully explain India's current plight without considering the role of education, or the lack of it, in nurturing the nation's mediocrity. By any yardstick, India's student population is gigantic, and surely surpasses that of China. But India's literacy rate is 73%, well behind that of China (96%) and even that of Kenya (78%). Many schools in rural India either don't have teachers, or do not conduct examinations. India is facing a herculean task of recruiting at least a million teachers both at the primary and secondary levels.

Above all, the malaise of mediocrity is seeded in our exam-oriented teaching that entails mugging, as opposed to awareness-centric education that induces learning. According to Apple Computers' cofounder Steve Wozniak, 'the Indian education system is based around studiousness and doesn't encourage creativity'.[20] It is not even 'studiousness'; that is hard work. Students go for soft options in its place, like coaching which has become more important than the classroom. To fill the need, our system has invented 'dummy' schools, a euphemism for schools that do not require one to physically attend classes, allowing students to instead spend most of their time coaching for competitive examinations for government jobs that ensure 'permanent' employment. The problem with a major portion of Indian society is that we don't value creativity. From our childhood, we are taught by our parents and teachers alike, directly or indirectly, that the pursuit of creativity is a high-risk path, and that the road well-travelled is safer. As we climb our educational ladder, this thought gets engraved in our minds, whereby we end up becoming so obsessed with our marksheets that we lose the thirst for knowledge and ignore the ways to use it creatively.

But in spite of it all, India has been unerringly producing considerable numbers of high-quality graduates in every faculty there is, albeit from the Western diasporic ground. This lends credence to the hypothesis that it's not Indian biology or brains but the Indian post-independence polity and 'work culture' that inhibits excellence on home soil. This inference is also bolstered by India's past standing as a *Vishwa guru* (world teacher), which wouldn't have been possible in a mediocre environment.

The fact that India contributed immensely in diverse fields such as science, mathematics, surgery, medicine, etc., has been widely documented. In her 2021 book, *Revisiting the Educational Heritage of Ancient India*, Sahana Singh frames her meticulous study with the observation that "When swords quenched their thirst and famine ravaged the lands, Indians still held on to their truth that there was nothing more purifying than knowledge." The former President of India Ram Nath Kovind pointed out: "In dealing with today's challenges, we can draw inspiration from universities in Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila and Vallabhi which had set high standards of teaching and research. Scholars and students from all across the world came to those centers to attain specialized knowledge. That ancient system, which had many elements of modernity, produced great scholars such as Charaka, Aryabhata, Chanakya, Panini, Patanjali, Gargi, Maitreyi, and Thiruvalluvar."[21]

Our ancient universities attracted pupils and scholars from Korea, Japan, China, Tibet, Indonesia, Persia, and Turkey. The famous Chinese scholar, Hsiuen Tsang, who travelled across the world, gave elaborate descriptions on the architecture, culture and ambiance of Nalanda in his travelogues.

Higher education: where did we slip up?

The overarching question therefore crops up: if our education and knowledge traditions were so superior, why are we now bereft of that culture of educational excellence? Who is responsible? Can we blame it all on the Islamic onslaught and British colonial uprooting? If it is the latter, what have we done about it post-Independence? Clearly, we have done precious little. So invisible we are on the world education excellence map that we consider it a matter of some satisfaction, if not pride, whenever we inch up on global rankings. "A record 71 Indian universities have qualified for the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2022, up from 63 in the previous year, but none of them made it to the top 300 list."[22] However, in stark contrast, China has the joint fifth-highest number of institutions in the top 200, overtaking Canada and on a par with the Netherlands. But the statistics show that now India's performance in higher education at the global level is both alarming and shameful. The reality is that despite having 900 universities, 39,000 colleges and 10,000 stand-alone institutions, "India's higher education sector is characterized by institutionalized mediocrity."[23] One consequence of mediocrity in higher education is that it directly impacts India's research and innovation infrastructure. As a starter, only a fistful of higher education institutions support research.

Universities are tasked with building a valuable and efficient human resource equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. Therefore, the responsibility of the development of not only the country, but also its education system, falls upon the shoulders of universities and other institutions of higher education. Well-developed universities

which focus on the growing needs of the present age and on shaping students into well-rounded persons of the society is therefore, a prerequisite for the betterment and growth of our nation. In turn, they would help inject a much-needed 'spirit of creative thinking and innovation' that could help stem the tide of decades-old mediocrity. Rabindranath Tagore's words should become the 'anthem' for every single educational institution across India: "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free; Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection; Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action—Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

The decision of the central government to invite universities from abroad to open campuses in India is an indirect admission of this 'mediocrity'. While this may do some good, it might further deepen the mediocrity. As noted by some observers, "The new initiative may make India the new global education destination, but it could make the problem worse. Outstanding teachers can seek positions in various branches of foreign universities. And we may be left with mediocrity, which will lead to further degradation."[24] The present state of affairs exposes the glorification of mediocrity, resulting in the belittling of those who discharge their responsibilities with impartiality and who have the requisite credentials and talent. "To say that India is the third largest economy is of no value when it has miserably failed to provide a world-class university system to its citizens."[25]

While on the subject of education and mediocrity, we must take a look at the nation's preoccupation with competitive tests, such as the JEE (Joint Entrance

Examination) and NEET (National Eligibility Entrance Test), for engineering and medical higher education. The single-minded focus on 'getting through' the tests compromises the natural space for wonderment, discovery, and creativity. The price that the young aspirants pay can be summed up in a few words: "no life, no hobbies, burnout, lost childhood." Parents sacrifice their 'social lives' and 'small pleasures' to help their kids. When we read that premier educational institutes in our country have an admission rate of about 0.1%, what kind of outcome can we expect? It is another story about what happens with that 0.1%.

Battered they may be, but still the aspirants enter the coveted IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology), some of the very few institutions in India which are recognized worldwide as centers of excellence. Seven of the top 10 institutions of higher education in India are IITs, and nine of the top 10 engineering colleges in the country are also IITs, according to government ranking of universities. More than one in three students (37%) in professional courses in India are enrolled in engineering. So, in our national quest to shed mediocrity and attain excellence, we should study how we have used what this 'excellence' yields. The verdict is mixed. Many 'IITians' have made significant contributions not only as engineers but also in areas as diverse as start-ups and the civil service and politics. About 20–30% seek greener pastures abroad. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, more than 1.5 million Indians were studying abroad as of January 2023. The outflow of students abroad is expensive for India in several ways. According to the Reserve Bank of India, spending on education abroad by Indian students shot up by 44%—from

1.9 billion dollars (in 2013–2014) to 2.8 billion dollars (in 2017–2018). Despite the claims of India being the 'fastest-growing' large economy in the world, the pattern of Indian students going abroad for higher education continues to rise at a rapid pace. They spend annual amounts of up to 30 billion dollars.[26] Although most students stay home, "90% plus of them would [go] if they could."[27] Many who head abroad do not return. This is not only a 'brain drain' but also a kind of flight of capital. Some might quip that 'brain drain' is better than 'brain-in-a-drain', but it still implies a serious loss of highly skilled talent that India desperately needs, even if the problem is the system, not the individual.

The language question

When we discuss education in India, we cannot ignore the role of languages and how the Constitution of India, seventy-five years after its adoption, continues to view them. We should give thought to one of its controversial provisions regarding what we may call the lingua franca of free India. Article 343 made Hindi in the Devanagari script the official language of the Union while, at the same time, extending the use of English for fifteen years in respect of all the official purposes of the Union for which it was being used immediately before such commencement. Later, English also was given the status of the associate official language of India in the Official Language Act, 1965. Despite impressive numbers of people learning English, India is a country where English is spoken fluently only by a privileged few, functionally by an aspirational substructure, and not at all by the majority of the population. The irony is that while the country is celebrating 75 years since Independence, the Supreme Court of

India uses only English, not Hindi or other local languages. According to a Lok Foundation survey, English is far more an urban than a rural phenomenon; just 3% of rural respondents said that they could speak English, as against 12% of urban respondents. There is a clear class element at work—41% of the rich could speak English as against less than 2% of the poor.

In fact, the most pervasive 'discrimination' in India is not caste, class or race or religion; it is linguistic—between the English-speaking and the non-English-speaking. In every aspect of life this 'apartheid' is rampant. Even Prime Minister Modi is a victim of that; he is scoffed at by the elite for his lack of proficiency in English. But just as we cannot turn the clock back on other things so it is with English. Its importance is not just in how many people speak it, but in what it is used for. It is the major language of trade and commerce, news and information in this world of globalization. People belonging not only to different language groups but also to the same speech community make use of English in their inter-personal communication. It continues to act as an indispensable 'link' language, and symbolizes, in Indian minds, better education and better intellect.

While pondering over its future in India, it is also useful to go back to how English got introduced into colonial India and what was it was intended for. Before the British, primarily Arabic and Sanskrit were the major languages. Pouring scorn and contempt for two of the oldest and greatest languages, Macaulay justified their replacement by saying that continuing with them was to 'waste one's youth in learning how one is to purify oneself after touching an ass or what texts of the Vedas one is to repeat to expiate

the crime of killing a goat'. Incidentally, Macaulay's contempt for Sanskrit stands in stark contrast to what the arch-orientalist William Jones said: "Sanscrit language, whatever be it antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious [having more cases] than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either."[28]

We must also wonder if one of our strongest strengths—proficiency in English—has also had an adverse fallout: 'excellence' in English has made us think that it makes us excellent in everything we do. As was observed way back in 1992, "India's educated class, enthralled by their own eloquence in English, seem to find almost sublime satisfaction in speech-making at the expense of action, and agitation at the expense of coherence."[29] It makes us feel smug and superior while actually turning us 'mediocre', perhaps exactly what Macaulay intended. He called it a way for 'the improvement of the people of this country…' He said: "The dialects commonly spoken among the natives of this part of India contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are moreover so poor and rude that, until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them. It seems to be admitted on all sides, that the intellectual improvement of those classes of the people who have the means of pursuing higher studies can at present be affected only by means of some language not vernacular amongst them… We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue… We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."[30]

After 70 years of English as an 'associate official language' of India, have we measured up to Macaulay's 'high' expectations? Or, has he done an unintended favor, for which we have to be forever grateful? How would India have been if Arabic and Sanskrit remained as languages not only of speech, but for all other purposes? What has English done to us? Put differently, have we, learning not only to live with it but realizing its indispensability as a 'unifier', fully exploited its leverage for India's emergence as a great power? The answer is no.

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Mediocrity and Corruption

While delving deep into the abyss of intellectual mediocrity in India, we must also take full cognizance of moral decline, which is equally pervasive and pernicious. The two are connected because moral life is more demanding, and a mediocre mind prefers the opposite: mediocre effort. That leads to 'moral mediocrity', the proneness to be about as morally good as their peers—not especially better, not especially worse. As a consequence, both our ambition for excellence and aptitude for a virtuous life, become modest and middling. The symbiosis of the intellectual and the ethical has come to both lacerate and incarnate in three ways: the *morass* (that we are in), the mindset, (that we have acquired), the malaise (that afflicts us). In everyday life, being mediocre has come to subsume moral

moderation or degradation too. We will therefore deal with the double-faced subject under the broad rubric of mediocrity. The dictionary describes 'mediocrity' as a low degree of merit, an unresponsive attitude imbued with a general apathy, a middle state of existence.[31] In fact, the word 'mediocre' derives from the Latin *mediocris*, which literally means 'halfway up a mountain', or 'settle halfway to the summit of a difficult mountain'. That is where we are most at ease. The problem is being okay with the sense of being mediocre.

Mediocrity is not only a state of our psyche but also our way of life; it manifests in multiple ways: the partiality for the short-term and for short-cuts, for taking the line of least resistance; the tendency to make easy money and to be content with median rewards and awards, the conscious avoidance of risks… This fuels corruption, which clearly is pandemic in its proportion and cancerous in its effect on the Indian psyche. Corruption is a form of mediocrity. The desire on the part of the giver and the taker to cut corners: the giver, in order to buy a problem out, and the taker to get rich quick. Governments also want to purchase popularity, if not power, through bail-outs and hand-outs. Corruption—the misuse of public office or of entrusted power for private gain, allegedly with the connivance of official functionaries—has ballooned, and threatens to eat away at the nation's vitals. But it is not only Indian; it is universal. It is not a modern phenomenon. According to Ramsay MacMullen,[32] this was one of the factors for the dismal plight of the once-invincible Roman civilization.

The ancient Indian strategist, Kautilya, made no bones about it: "As it is impossible not to taste the honey that falls on the tongue, in a similar manner, it is impossible

for a government servant not to eat up at least a bit of the King's revenue." He even wrote about those whom we now call whistleblowers, and how to reward them. In today's India, if one were to be asked to point the finger at one overarching evil in India above everything else, it has to be corruption. According to Transparency International's Corruption Index (2022), India scored 40% in terms of honesty, and tagged at 85th position in the world in the list of 180 countries. But corruption is not confined to the government only. Nothing is too trivial or too high-tech or holy to be a source of corruption—be it a temple *hundi* or the telecom spectrum, a ration card or airline routes, common coal or cattle fodder or fertilizer… It does not matter whether it is a government project or the public distribution system, or a direct dole—anything is good enough to enrich private parties, low and high-level bureaucrats, politicians, ministers, and middlemen. The means and modalities that were invented to siphon illegal funds to overseas shores was through what came to be called *hawala*.

All the laws passed, such as the Right to Information Act, and the establishment of what are called 'integrity institutions' over the past seven decades, like Information Commissions, Human Rights Commissions, Vigilance Commissions, Anti-Corruption Bureaus, and lately, Lokpal and Lokayuktas, have proven ineffective. So long as there is motivation (greed), incentive (lesser evil); compulsion/ justification (there is no other way); opportunity (get rich quick), and absence of accountability (no citizen entitlement), there will be abuse of entrusted power for private gain. In the end, it is people that matter. The fact also is that far too many of us in the mainstream are too easily willing, even anxious, to 'pay off to sweeten the pot',

to smoothen hassles and get things done unhindered. When so few complain, and those that do are treated as 'trouble-makers', and so many try to use corruption to get their things done, and the powerful among us feel no qualms of conscience to exploit that power at others' expense, how can public life be cleansed?

Despite declarations of 'war of corruption' by prime ministers down to the cartoonist R.K. Laxman's 'common man', corruption in India is across-the-board, thriving, and unstoppable, and is to be expected in every transaction, public and private. People have started factoring it in as a transactional cost but it gets out of hand when it becomes extortion. Worse still is when public money is siphoned off and welfare schemes do not reach the beneficiaries, and when poor people are forced to part with their meagre money for jobs, education, and even primary healthcare. It is now a simple but stark choice before anyone living in India—either you agree or acquiesce to be a part of the corpus of corruption, or fight and be drained to death, or pack your bags and depart.

Successive governments have spoken against corruption, but did not dismantle the systems and procedures that enable it to persist. Indeed, "The irony of corruption in public life is that everyone likes to talk about it, but no one does anything to stop it."[33] The reason is that systemized corruption is very beneficial for everyone involved—the bribe-giver gets his much-delayed or manipulated justice; the taker gets the booty, the system is relieved that a case is closed, and a 'problem' is solved. The message is clear, if not loud: larceny and robbery will be tolerated, but only if the proceeds are shared without 'discrimination'. Even if there are no big-ticket scams at the highest level, there

are billions of acts of fleecing, extortion, and exploitation that make life of an ordinary citizen of India so harrowing. Public servants like panchayat members, municipal councilors, corporators, members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs), members of Parliament (MPs), etc., spend a lot of money, much more than the prescribed limit, to win elections, and to fund their 'protégés', called well-wishers, and party workers. They openly admit to this, but pass the buck to their constituents.

All of that doesn't bother us much because it is backstopped by our fawning sycophancy, and our readiness to mistake servility for service, humility for humbleness, and hospitality for slavishness… The bigger problem is that we stay smug with this feeling for long patches of time without doing anything about it. Mediocrity is what keeps the law of averages alive. It is what tells you that adequacy is okay, that excellence is needless. Human beings instinctively avoid extra effort. If less is sufficient to get by, our mind does not let us do any more. It is the environment in which one is born and the culture in which one grows up that mainly determines whether one is a creature of mediocrity or excellence. It does not mean that it is not one of what Goethe referred to as 'great, eternal, iron laws' of inevitability; there are exceptions either way, but what it implies is the law of high probability. Although in India we have developed a tendency of self-dislike, there is sufficient room to believe that ancient India was a land of pioneering achievements and excellence in a wide range of fields like art, architecture, mathematics, and science and technology, made possible by some of the greatest creative minds. What stands in stark contrast is where India is positioned *today* in all those fields.

Unfortunately, the mediocre mindset that got embedded into us does not even let us agree upon it as a nation. Since we don't want to admit we are mediocre, it is easy to get away by questioning whether our forebearers were much different. But there is mounting evidence that Indian civilization until as recently as the 11th century was great. And in economic terms, it was said to constitute 30% of the global economy, bigger than Western Europe and even China today. It fell to about 18% by the time of the Industrial Revolution (1760–1840), and by the time the British left in the mid-1900s, it was around 5%. India was invaded and ravaged so many times, that at some point in time we got dispirited and decline set in. What India went through was a thousand-year slump and slide, which covers roughly forty generations. Such a long period spanning so many peer groups was bound to affect the morale, mood, and mindset of the people. But the larger question is whether the invasions led to a loss of elan and excellence, or if there was something embedded in the Indian psyche that emboldened the invaders and eventually culminated in our meek resistance to British colonization. The hasty British departure and the brutal rupture of the composite Indian consciousness into two, through Partition, even further deepened the decline and despair. We got rid of the foreign yoke but servitude still held us in its grip. The pandemic of mediocrity found a hospitable home in the Indian consciousness.

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Poor Mindset: the System at Fault

Mediocrity is not only a matter of mindset. Peak performance requires a body that is in the pink of health. Even if our mind is motivated, if the body fails, we cannot do much about it. One visible effect is the finding that an average Indian's peak productive period lasts a mere seven years—less than half of that of a Chinese worker. It tells us that our workforce, the engine of the economy, is far from healthy. How can we have faster growth with a sick, and often disgruntled worker at the wheel? What India needs is a 'critical mass' of skilled labor force to draw the benefits of technological progress; and a healthy labor force to work at full potential. With that yardstick, we have miles to go. But a *Lancet* study on how good a nation is, in relation to the strength of its human capital, indicates that India ranks 158 and China 44, out of 195 countries. One reason India is not extracting the maximum from its abundance of human capita is that most people in India have lost 'the spirit of work', which the *Bhagavad Gita* extolled (work for work's sake), and have developed an 'aversion to work'. The middle class in particular wants to do less work and earn more pay. And, the less we do, the less we become capable of doing, another sign of mediocrity.

Our 'mindset' also shows up as our wariness of anyone who tries to rise above the average, or break out of conformity; such a person is often dubbed a 'show-off', a 'spoiler', and a sore thumb. Basically, we are not passionate about anything other than cricket and movies, and of late, perhaps politics. Even there, that 'passion' does not translate into performance. We are elated with a bronze medal, not

a gold, with being a runner-up than a winner, elated with being one of the top ten, not the No.1. If an athlete *aims* for the bronze medal, how can he get a gold? It is unsettling to note that, perhaps with rare exceptions, every Indian who has reached the peak in literature, science, sports, business, medicine, or academics is one who is living and working abroad.

Subhash Kak offers a good example: "Digital is supposed to be India's forte. But India has no company in the Digital Top 36 (whereas Asia China, Japan, and Korea have 12), and only two companies in Digital Top 100 (China, Japan, and Korea have 30). TCS and Infosys, which are in the top 100 (at lowly 38 and 71) mostly contract out programmers or do projects for clients, so they shouldn't even count."[34]

Dheeraj Dogra adds, "Singularly as individuals, us Indians are unbeatable, some of the best brains in the world, however collectively we are failures, we play for ourselves, not as a team."[35] We find it difficult to work together, to complement and get along, to keep the peace and promote the common good. A 'closed' mind is a consequence. China is a closed society with open minds; India is an open society with closed minds.[36] The Chinese work in a highly controlled system, but everyone is either 'brainwashed' or believes that he is being both prudent and patriotic. In India, everyone is fierce about their freedom, but also knows that excellence is not required for societal survival and success. The aim is to be merely above the average. If by minimum struggle and sacrifice one can lead a comfortable life, the logic goes, why then aim any higher? That is another area where the Chinese have an edge. Ten Chinese can work as one being with twenty arms; it is just

the opposite in India: even a single arm wants to make a statement. We are lost in between the rugged individualism of USA and the faceless collectivism of China. We are poor in one key capacity: co-creativity, the collaborative development of new value (concepts, solutions, products and services) together with experts and/or stakeholders. We are self-righteous, have all the answers to everybody's problems but not for ours. As Dogra puts it, "We need to ask ourselves: why does our system kill future heroes, while the US helps raise even ordinary Indians to iconic levels?"[37] That is because our current role models are what Gautam Bhatia calls 'interchangeable personalities of India'—the politician, the cricketer, the bureaucrat, the journalist, the film hero, and the Godman.[38]

Mediocrity also has a huge bearing on India's 'productivity'—simply put, the output per unit of input, or how efficiently resources are used. That is why our GDP is high but our per capita GNP is low. One reason for our almost chronic low productivity is that few enjoy what they do for a living. A survey done a few years ago revealed that "More than half (52%) of working professionals in India do not enjoy their work and do not look forward to new challenges at work. About 29% of the work force in both the organized as well as the unorganized sectors feels that wasting time at work has become an unwritten office culture."[39] We are not encouraged to think by ourselves, nor do we encourage critical thinking skills to solve a problem, and we discourage those who dare to question the *status quo*. Initiative and inventiveness is frowned upon. In India, your superior is not your senior colleague; he is the 'boss' whose 'good buck' can make or mar your future and life. He or she expects you to only play second fiddle.

At the junior levels, employees soon prefer that the boss tells them what to do, and expect to be micromanaged. Roles and responsibilities are strictly delineated; crossing the line can ruin your career. However, it is not that we are below par everywhere and all the time. India is beginning to show its mettle in such areas as textiles, fashion, arts and crafts, etc. What inhibits creativity is the abhorrence of experimentation, fear of rejection and failure, and the safety of conformity. Indian society rewards 'success' (measured materially, by any means) and humiliates anyone who falls short, and ridicules any rebel with or without a cause. That breeds and fosters mediocrity. What we lack is 'consistent consistency', to routinely rise above the average while doing whatever we do. Being 'average' in abilities is not wrong; everyone's IQ is not high; it is aiming to being average that is the rub. A mediocre person will only aim at mediocrity. The fact is that, as Nobel laureate Paul Krugman once remarked, "Productivity isn't everything, but in the long run, it is almost everything." Alarmingly, it is even being claimed that India's performance has deteriorated over time in the past 250 years in terms of relative productivity.

Today the country faces a new challenge: even the traditionally well-off farming communities are demanding reservations in government jobs. Their demand is an offshoot of the deepening agrarian crisis which, if ignored, can snowball into an explosive situation. On top of it, the cost of production is high in India. In 2019, India ranked 68th in the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), China ranked 34th. India lost its competitiveness by 10 ranks from the previous year, whereas economies such as Vietnam improved competitiveness by 10 ranks. Productivity presupposes good labor relations and a healthy, and

happy, work force. Fundamentally we must understand that to be 'productive', the person in question is happy and fully involved and spares no effort to do what he or she is supposed to be do, what is called *swadharma*. We view work more as a *bhadyata* (burden) not *karthavya* (chosen duty). In India, most 'workers' go to work to mark time to make a living and let their personal issues hamper their work. In some countries though, whatever grudges, grievances, and problems they have and however much they may even dislike the conditions of the workplace, once one is at work, he or she forgets everything and labors like a person possessed. Although the social effects of such work ethics are in question these days in such places, it still plays a big part in their high rates of productivity.

India's lag in productivity brings up the related question: why so few of its companies, if any, are consistently competitive at the global level. This question got highlighted when Steve Wozniak made some critical but thoughtful comments on this issue. He said, "The culture here [in India] is one of success based upon academic excellence, studying, learning, practicing, and having a good job and a great life. For upper India, not the lower. I see two Indias. That's a lot like Singapore, study, study, work hard and you get an MBA, you will have a Mercedes, but where is the creativity? The creativity gets left out when your behavior is too predictable and structured, everyone is similar. Look at a small country like New Zealand, the writers, singers, athletes; it's a whole different world."[40]

The central message again is that, for want of a better word, the 'system' tends to produce mediocrity. It is true that most youngsters in India want a 'good job and a great life'; very few prefer to be entrepreneurs and risk-takers.

It is also because not only our economic milieu but also sociocultural ethos is not conducive and compatible with it. If anyone should be expected to be creative, it is the privileged minority elite (1% or 2%), but they don't because there is no incentive. And the measures and metrics the people of India have codified to gauge our successes (e.g., money, bungalow, high-end car…) are fundamentally wrong. The young of India intrinsically don't lack creativity—they are some of the most cerebral in the world—but they end up seemingly lacking in creativity simply because everything around is an ocean of mediocrity. The Catch-22 situation in India is this: without taking risks you remain mediocre, but if you take risks and fail you are trampled upon. In countries like New Zealand and Denmark, even if you fail, you can still live the normal life, if not a great one. Unless we can give that kind of confidence to Indian youth, they will continue to seek a safe but mediocre job rather than venture into the risky start-up arena on their own. Instead of bailing out cannibalistic corporates, the government should lend its helping hand to those whose experiments with innovations lead them into blind alleys, or create an appropriate insurance cover for them to recover. India will then be flooded with ideating and creativity.

If we do not change our direction soon, the scenario that led to the following will endure. Despite having emerged as an information technology powerhouse, and with several highly reputed IITs, India has failed to produce, in recent decades, a scientist worthy of receiving the coveted Nobel Prize for working on a project in India. There has not been a single world-class company (like Oracle, Microsoft, Facebook, Apple) in India. Few Indian-branded products have a strong worldwide presence and

recognition. Explanations are abundant. According to some, our mediocrity comes down to the most mundane of it all: money. One scientist said: "It comes from society. None of the scientists are encouraged to become entrepreneurs, scientists are not to be the poor people who can't think money… We don't have the breed of people who are not able to translate, say, what I am talking about microbiology into money."[41]

And as Shekhar Gupta reminds us, "Not since the pre-Independence generation have we had a world-class scientist with cutting-edge research, a real technologist with a globally known patent or invention. Unless you count Bose speakers. India claims to be a great IT power with almost no proprietary software, brands, except in outsourcing. It is the fastest-growing telecom market but its lakhs of degree-holding engineers, including tens of thousands of wonderful IITians, haven't invented/designed/patented/produced an original mobile phone model, something young Chinese and Koreans are doing all the time."[42]

An eminent scientist, P.M. Bhargava, had lamented that India had not produced any Nobel Prize winner in science since 1930, "largely because of the lack of a scientific environment in the country…"[43] In science, it is not only the Nobel but also other prestigious awards like the Turing Award and the Fields Medal. As someone quipped, 'the reason we have zero winners is because we invented the number zero, and we are still so proud that we don't miss a chance to brag about it'. What is worse is that this mediocrity is becoming our benchmark, while a large part of the competitive world is raising their qualitative bar. Our oversized ego comes in the way of our coming out of the cocoon of mediocrity. As Infosys founder N.R. Narayana

Murthy once said, "The biggest challenge for all of us, not just politicians or bureaucrats, is that we, Indians, have the highest ego per unit of achievement."[44]

India's path to greatness hinges heavily on how it harnesses its human capital—broadly defined as the aggregate levels of education, training, skills, and health in a population. Our education and health infrastructure needs a radical revamp. The shocking truth is that after seventy-five years of political freedom, the elementary living infrastructure—communication, health, sanitation, schools—is abysmal in large stretches of India. Even on an all-India basis, the country spends just 1.3% of its GDP on health infrastructure. And that, by itself, is a huge factor in determining that, in large part, free India as a nation has failed the very premise of what Gandhi called *economic swaraj*. This was the primary lesson from the Corona pandemic and it is surprising that this slips the attention of policymakers.

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3

The Indian Constitution – Un-Indian and Unworkable

Rule Book for the State

While introspecting how free India has fared after seventy-five years of existence, we must stop turning the Nelson's eye to that which has been staring straight at us for quite a while. That is, the 'ailing elephant in the room'—the Constitution of India, which has the distinction of being the largest in the world, is so large and flabby that it is rarely read as a whole and is amenable to different takeaways.

The Constitution of any country gives shape to its soul, a soul that embodies a 'broader set of political values, ideals and goals'. A Constitution is the rule book for a state. It sets out the fundamental principles by which the state is governed. It describes the main institutions of the state, and defines the relationship between these institutions (for example, between the executive, legislature, and judiciary). It places limits on the exercise of power, and sets out the rights and duties of citizens. The Constitution of a country is not simply an assemblage or assortment of disparate articles and provisions. In contrast to ordinary legislation, a Constitution embodies the fundamental choices made by

a country and its people that establish the basis for political and social life. As Aristotle said, a Constitution is a 'mode of life,' not solely a legal document. Constitutions are sometimes described as 'autobiographies of nations', and reflect how a society sees itself, and about who is included in, and who is excluded from the nation's self-narrative. It goes beyond legal technicalities and entails fundamental philosophical and even ethical dimensions. Every law enacted by the government has to be in conformity with the Constitution. It is this that gives an overarching framework to govern and guide the country, with the principal objective of keeping it as a coherent political polity. And that is conditioned by the Constitution, because Constitutions provide the structure of rules and constraints within which political decisions are made. For any radical change in the political calculus and discourse, there is no other way except to radically change the Constitution. The Indian Constitution provides for the parliamentary form of government, with a bicameral legislature at the center, consisting of the *Lok Sabha* (Lower House of Parliament) and the *Rajya Sabha* (Upper House of Parliament). While the Lok Sabha consists of the elected representatives of people, the Rajya Sabha consists of representatives elected by the state legislative assemblies. The President is the head of the state. In actual practice, the Prime Minister, aided by the Council of Ministers, heads the executive and is responsible for governance. The functioning of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary is directed by the Constitution.

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Federal or Unitary?

The original text of the Indian Constitution contained 395 articles in 22 parts and 8 schedules. It came into effect on 26 January 1950, the day that India celebrates each year as its *Republic Day*. India was the biggest country that chose 'democratic republic' as its governing paradigm, to hold this commonwealth of a country together—with over 2,000 ethnic groups, 122 languages and 22 official languages, 12 religions and faiths, over 300 castes, nearly 4,000 sub-castes—and instill a sense of shared nationhood in its people. It was democratic because the people were expected to govern themselves, and it was a republic because the government's power is derived from its people.

Consequently, in the late 1940s, our Constitution-makers tried to cover every conceivable contingency, preempt every potential problem, and create multiple modalities to resolve them when they arose, and not leave too much room for loopholes. That led to many ambiguities, ambivalences, overlaps and points of friction, which have made the Indian State conceptually impaired and dysfunctional, unable to get its act together and operate like a coherent, synergistic organism. Although it claims to be what '*We, the people of India*' have given unto themselves, the people had nothing to do with it, neither in its preparation or in giving it its legitimacy; its center of gravity is the *Sarkar* (government), not the *Praja* (people). After all, "The legitimacy of the government of a free society depends on the consent of the governed. Consent by the people even in principle is meaningless if the Constitution is a mysterious document revered by all but understood by few."[1] Even worse, it creates asymmetry of power at all levels and in all spheres.

And yet it is the template of India—often hailed as its Holy Book—that has tenuously held the Union together for 74 long years, and has given the governments the unquestioned authority to run and rule the nation. Perhaps, what is a miracle, not expected by the framers themselves, is that it has lasted this long, not because no one felt the need, but because everyone suspected everyone else's motives.

Upfront, we must note that the Constitution of India, which the Constituent Assembly adopted on 26 November 1949, was the product of a most damaging colonial mindset that India's current Prime Minister exhorts, 75 years after independence, we must get rid of. That is the paradox: he blames, rightly, the colonial mindset for much of what has gone wrong, and yet worships its most visible symbol. There are those who suggest that "defending the 'Constitution and the Constitution alone' is effectively defending colonialism."[2] Our Constitution and its makers deserve our respect and gratitude, but that does not mean that the Constitution should be treated as something it was not meant to be: eternal like a scripture. The plain fact is that the Constitution has fallen far short in achieving its main purpose: to serve as a 'source of unity, reflecting the spirit of India', as many hoped and some still think it does. Nor has it achieved its purpose as a tool to infuse a shared feeling of oneness and brotherhood in a nation as diverse and disparate as India.

It has long been the matter of debate among scholars whether the Constitution of India is completely federal or unitary in nature. It contains features of both a federal constitution and a unitary constitution. Nations are described as 'federal' or 'unitary', depending on the way in which governance is organized. In a unitary set-up, the

central government has plenary powers of administration and legislation, with its constituent units having little autonomy. In a truly federal set-up, there is a two-tier government with well-assigned powers and functions. The central and the state governments work in coordination, and at the same time act independently. In the USA, there is a dual citizenship, first the state citizenship and then the national citizenship. Representation in its Senate, which is equal in the case of a true federation such as the USA, is not applicable in the case of Indian states. The representation of the states in the Rajya Sabha is not equal, and depends from state to state, regulated by the center which is basically a unitary feature.

The Indian Constitution lays down a dual polity where the central government is not merely a league of states, nor are the states mere administrative units or agencies of the central government, because they have their own constitutional legitimacy. In fact, the word 'federation' is mentioned nowhere in the Indian Constitution. Yet, intriguingly, Article 1, which provides that "*India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States*", implies that India is an integral whole, and divided into different states only for the convenience of administration. This phrase is now being used by some politicians to suggest the direct opposite—that the states, perhaps even more than the center, are the primary repositories of power and legitimacy, and hence that the preeminent position that the center has come to occupy over time is a constitutional anomaly, if not a travesty. Even a cursory reading of the Constituent Assembly Debates would show that such interpretation is a misread. States do have absolute powers over defined spheres of governance, but there is little doubt that the

Constitution-framers deliberately chose to make the center much stronger than in a typical federal state.

Article 248 in the Constitution of India vests the Parliament with the exclusive power to make any law with respect to any matter not enumerated in the Concurrent List or State List. It is this provision that endows the center with what is called 'residual power'. A typical unitary system is governed constitutionally as one single unit, with one constitutionally-created legislature. All power is top-down. A unitary state is a sovereign state governed as one single unit in which the central government is supreme, and any administrative divisions (sub-national units) exercise only powers that the central government chooses to delegate.

All this makes the task of pigeon-holing or straightjacketing the Indian Constitution that much more daunting. Some say that the Indian federation was formed as a 'holding-together federation', unlike the USA, which was formed as a 'coming-together federation'. It is a system of government which could accommodate regional autonomy while safeguarding and promoting unity. The national and state governments coexist and derive their powers from the same Constitution. Both are conceived as equal partners, unlike in a unitary system. In the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendments, panchayats and municipalities were also added as a third level. Our Constitution is unitary because, unlike in other federations, the states in India don't have any right to territorial integrity and, in spite of a dual polity, the Constitution of India adopted the system of single citizenship. In the nature of a unitary state, India is governed by a common penal code. In the USA, which is a federation of states, different states have different laws—some states have capital punishment, others don't.

That is why our system of governance is called, in its intent, *quasi-federal* (some say pseudo-federal or semi-federal). There is nothing wrong with it, provided it suits our own 'democratic credentials and civilization', and is crafted by its own coherent system, not without haphazardly lifting select features from both federal and unitary systems.

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How the Indian Constitution Evolved

Our Constitution is, in actuality, a 'bag of borrowings' from other Constitutions. That includes the Constitutions of the UK (parliamentary form), the USA (preamble; fundamental rights), Ireland (directive principles), the former USSR (fundamental duties), Japan (the concept of 'procedure established by law'), France (liberty, equality, fraternity), Canada (federation with a strong center and residual powers with the center), Australia (concurrent list), and so on.

It is hard to believe, but true, that the Constituent Assembly thought it fit to draw inspiration from Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution of Germany (the German Reich), a provision which Hitler used to seize power. India used this article to frame Article 352, which Indira Gandhi invoked later in 1975 to impose the Emergency. And none, not a single 'borrowing', from India itself, that is Bharat! And this, despite the availability of long evidence showing India's rich republican models and experience. In that sense,

the Constitution prepared and adopted by the Constituent Assembly was indeed *sui generis*, one of its own kind—nothing endogenous, all exogenous. It was, in one sense, a vote of no confidence on our heritage.

That ours was an alien hotch-potch was acknowledged by the founders themselves. Rajendra Prasad, President of the Constituent Assembly and first President of the Republic, himself said: "The Constitution which we have drafted is a copy of the Constitutions of Western countries." That was because, from the very outset, the Constitution-makers, particularly stalwarts like Ambedkar and Nehru, had narrowed down the whole exercise to a choice between two models, unitary and federal, and when they found that neither fits India, they just mixed them up. As some members of the Constituent Assembly themselves observed, they were not able to "frame a Constitution more akin to the genius of the Indian people."[3] That led to a catastrophic historical error: ignoring the wealth of our own *sampradayas*, or traditions, ethos, rituals, practices, and our own conceptions of Self, spirituality, God, good and evil. It was a slap in the face of our native genius, culture, and 'indigenous constitutional tradition'. What we must note here is that it was a wholesale repudiation of all that this land and its people had stood for, and it reflected a continuation, rather constitutionalization, of colonialism.

Genesis and the messy compromises

The decision to adopt the parliamentary form of government was primarily Nehru's; it was not that of others like Patel and Ambedkar. The initial decision was taken in the summer of 1946, during a Congress Party meeting, and

then shepherded through the constitution-making process as a party directive. The Congress had formed an expert committee under the chairmanship of Nehru in preparation for the Constituent Assembly, and, in its meeting of 15 August, this small panel decided that independent India would have a British-type government…

At that time, neither Ambedkar nor Patel were in favor of a strictly parliamentary system. For that matter, neither was Mahatma Gandhi in favor of it, nor Pakistan's founder and All-India Muslim League leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah, although they were not involved in the framing of our Constitution. Ambedkar had earlier said, in 1945, that 'majority-rule', the fundamental basis of parliamentary governments, "is untenable in theory and unjustifiable in practice." Only seven months before he began work as chairman of the Drafting Committee, he had submitted plans to the Assembly's Subcommittee on Fundamental Rights for a 'United States of India'.[4] Such a momentous decision was taken under a 'party whip' (order) issued by the Congress Party. It is said that the "Congress persons were not allowed to vote freely. In a practice unheard of in a Constitution-making body, India's Constituent Assembly functioned under a system of whips issued by the party high command."[5]

Seventy-four years after its coming into being, the bitter pill we have to swallow is that quite simply, with all their undoubted commitment to the cause of India, what its founders produced as the *Constitution of India*, has not worked as it was expected to do. The guilt should be shared between the content of the Constitution as well as the implementors. It brings to mind the prophetic warning of Rajendra Prasad in his speech, as President of

the Constituent Assembly, while moving for adoption of the Constitution of India. He said: "We have prepared a democratic Constitution. But successful working of democratic institutions requires in those who have to work them willingness to respect the viewpoints of others, capacity for compromise and accommodation. Many things which cannot be written in a Constitution are done by conventions. Let me hope that we shall show those capacities and develop those conventions."[6] The inconvenient fact is that, over the past seven decades, those qualities have consistently dwindled down or have been whittled away. Instead, what we now have is confrontation and naked power struggle.

With the lucidity of hindsight, we can now say that the fatal fall began way back when our new rulers took the first decision. The maxim they did not pay much heed to was that every form of government does not fit every country. The Westminster system of government is best suited for homogenous societies, while consensus democracy is an appropriate form of government in heterogenous societies like India. This was recognized by some in the Constituent Assembly also. Kengal Hanumanthaiah (1949)[7] characterized it as: "We wanted the music of a veena or sitar, but here we have the music of an English band." Gandhi himself warned against it when he said, "If India copies England, it is my firm conviction that she will be ruined."[8] It is so tragic that his worst fears came true in his own lifetime, and one can only wonder why he did not or could not prevent it. The choice of the parliamentary system was one political party's decision. The brain behind this decision was Jawaharlal Nehru. Sardar Patel favored 'a directly elected President and governors'. What was finally

agreed upon, as usual, was a messy compromise—neither fully parliamentary nor presidential. We have a President who does not have the weight of a directly elected person.

Still some, like K.T. Shah, a member of the Constituent Assembly, argued that the President is not the 'gramophone of the Prime Minister'. The procedure of presidential elections is again not entirely indirect; the population of the country is made a crucial factor. Indicative of the fact that the President was meant to be more than a figurehead is the oath of office he/she takes, which includes the significant words, "I will devote myself to the service and well-being of the people of the Republic of India." Significantly, such words are not there in other oaths of office, even that of the Prime Minister; nor in the oaths of other presidents or prime ministers (e.g., the US President or the UK Prime Minister). All these oaths are confined to the constitution, not directly to the people, as our Constitution does. Whatever its intent might have been, these words were not backed by the necessary powers or means for the President of India to live up to it. The way the Indian Constitution dealt with the high office of the President is typical of the Constitution itself: always trying to mix and match opposites or couch it in ambiguities. The result is that the President of India has more moral muscle than many other presidents in a parliamentary system, but it became notional as he was effectively deprived of any way to make it good.

A look at the shortcomings

While it may sound churlish and petty nitpicking, and although India owes a huge debt of gratitude to its founding fathers, men and women of the highest integrity and

eminence, one must also note, with the unfair advantage of hindsight, that both the process and the product of the Constitution were deficient in many respects. We must even, with a naked eye, note them if only to benefit from that experience in charting the future. In finally adopting the Constitution, the Constituent Assembly did not give sufficient weight to the fact that Indian society is maddeningly multifaceted, to an extent perhaps unknown in any other of the world's great civilizations. Once such a doomed decision was made, what logically followed was to fall back on the Government of India Act, 1935—passed by the British Parliament, some 4,000 pages of how to govern its colony to its advantage—as the point of departure and reference for governance of free India. Ambedkar himself admitted to the charge of copying a colonial Constitution, saying, "As to the accusation that the Draft Constitution has produced a good part of the provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935, I make no apologies. There is nothing to be ashamed of in borrowing." It was not 'borrowing'; it was a virtual repudiation of the freedom struggle. In fact, even the words '*We, the people of India*' were adapted from the preamble of the American Constitution. Let us also recall what Benjamin Franklin, one of the seven Founding Fathers of the USA said, when asked what kind of government the Constitutional Convention should adopt: "A republic—if you can keep it." And Franklin added, "The delegates could have designed the best system in the world, but its success ultimately rested with the people."

The Constituent Assembly was not elected by the people, nor did they ratify it. The Assembly, whose members were not themselves directly chosen by the people, drafted it and also ratified it. How does it then reflect the

will of the people of India? The Constituent Assembly also started with the facile premise that modern India must be crafted to conform to the European template of 'nation-state', virtually turning the blind eye to India's ancient constitutional traditions, which included 'experimentation with monarchy, autocracy, democracy, republicanism, and even anarchy'. India's resilience was rooted in the rupture-less continuity of everyday life at the village level, regardless of whatever happened elsewhere. As Sir George Birdwood had pointedly remarked, "India has undergone more religious and political revolutions than any other country in the world but the village communities remain in full municipal vigor all over the peninsula."[9] This in fact was an echo of what Charles Metcalfe, the then acting Governor-General of India (1830) had said: "The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations… this union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has, I conceive, contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the peoples of India, through all the revolutions and changes which they have suffered… I dread everything that has a tendency to break them up."[10]

Any functioning of a constitution cannot be divorced from the broader moral underpinnings of the society it serves. From that perspective, what we face is a crisis of 'constitutional morality'. This doctrine was invoked by Ambedkar while introducing the Draft Constitution to the Constituent Assembly. According to him, "Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic," and nevertheless it can work only "where people are saturated with constitutional morality

such as the one described by George Grote, the historian." Firstly, with all his formidable erudition, 'democracy' in its truest sense of people-participatory governance was embedded in the ethos of ancient India. What is required is a "coexistence of freedom and self-imposed restraint," applicable to all the organs of the Constitution. While citizens were expected to respect the Constitution and obey constitutional authorities, they would also have the freedom to criticize those authorities who, in turn, would have to act within the limits set by law. It also requires that "people contesting for political power and their opposition should have reverence for the Constitution." In practical terms, it entails 'effective coordination between conflicting interests of different people and the administrative cooperation to resolve them amicably without any confrontation amongst the various advocacy constituencies working for the realization of their ends at any cost.' Apart from what a Constitution formally proposes and prescribes, there are also what are termed as 'constitutional conventions', rules of good political behavior, of self-discipline, and restraint from exercising powers to the full. They usually develop from established constitutional practice, but sometimes are deliberately created; and to count as a convention, they must be generally accepted to be morally mandatory. "Constitutional conventions are at work across all branches of government—legislative, judicial, and executive. Each embodies a principle of responsible government, or self-restraint: not exercising legal powers to the full; not abusing public power; and respecting the constitutional role and functions of the other branches of government."[11]

Our Constitution currently has 470 articles, and remains the longest in the world. Yet, right from the outset,

it was at best a motley conglomerate, with glaring omissions. It detailed a plethora of fundamental rights, but ignored 'fundamental duties' (although they were subsequently added through the 42nd 'emergency' amendments). The idea was taken from the then USSR Constitution's 'Citizen's duties.' Like the Directive Principles, these too remained on paper. That is because we Indians clamor for rights, and turn a blind eye to any responsibility, and we have failed to balance individual liberty and the demands of civil society. Gandhi said that if you do your duties, rights will follow. The India's current Prime Minister recently said, "In the last 75 years, we only kept talking about rights, fighting for rights and wasting our time."[12] Although one need not legally perform any 'duty' to qualify to be a rights-bearer, the truth is that rights and duties are another *dwanda*, like night and day. If everyone asserts his or her rights and does not do his/her duties, society will become dysfunctional. The fact that duty is the jural co-relative of right is conveniently set aside. The philosophy behind was well articulated by the eminent French jurist, Léon Duguit: "The decisive regeneration will consist above all in always substituting duties for rights in order the better to subordinate personality to sociability."[13]

The Gandhian idea of India's Constitution

While the Constituent Assembly thought it fit to 'borrow' features from an array of constitutions, it ignored the core ideas of Gandhi, who expressed it this way: "My idea of *Village Swaraj* is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary."[14] It was not an overt oversight but conscious

rejection. The Constituent Assembly had before it a document—*The Gandhian Constitution for Free India* (by S.N. Agarwal; 1946)—a sixty-page document divided into twenty-two chapters that included *Basic Principles*, *Fundamental Rights and Duties*, *Provincial Government*, *Central Government*, and *Judiciary*—with a foreword by Gandhi himself. The document strongly advocated a decentralized political and administrative setup with village panchayats as the core units. These units aggregate to form upper levels of government. Village panchayats were given extensive powers that included judicial functions as well. Fundamental duties were conjoined with fundamental rights; the document explicitly states that rights are contingent on the performance of duties.

Another document penned by M.N. Roy titled *Draft Constitution of Free India*, published in 1944, advocated similar ideas. The draft embraced radical decentralization and direct democracy. It called for the establishment of a nationwide network of 'People's Committees' (district/city governments) elected by citizens. These committees would enjoy wide and critical powers in federal, provincial, and local governance. They could, among other things, recall representatives. This draft—which was described as by far the most populist and radical manifesto for a 'New India'—met with the same fate as Agarwal's *Gandhian Constitution* of 1946. At the heart of both of them was local self-governance, what Gandhi called village swaraj, and Roy called People's committees. In ancient India, it was called *Gana-Sangha* or *Gana-Rajya*. If democracy means people's participation in running their own lives, then it can be nowhere more direct, transparent, and meaningful than at the local level, where there is contact between the citizenry

and their proxies, between the rulers and the ruled. The British academic and politician James Bryce, who delved deep into the history of local self-governance, observed, "Democracy needs local self-government as its foundation. That is the school in which the citizen acquires the habit of independent action, learns what is his duty to the State, and learns also how to discharge it."[15] We have to innovate our own paradigm of power sharing that effectively harmonizes the local and the national. Once upon a time, all politics was local. These days, it seems, all local politics is national. Maximum political and fiscal powers should be with the elected/selected body at the narrowest local level, while still vesting with the central government, for India to function as a modern nation-state. Even if states complain of creeping centralization, it is the states that need to allow more powers to local bodies like panchayats, much more than what was envisaged in the Constitutional Amendments 73 and 74 (1992). As a result, the imagined empowered third tier of the governing structure, next to the center and states, has remained as elusive as ever.

As pointed out by Gurcharan Das, India always thrived with a strong society and a weak state.[16] The 'strong state' that the Constitution created is where the shadow of the state hovers over the common man's life. That includes both center and states, the combination of which created its own contradiction. With a strong state at every level, it inevitably led to a society that was at the beck and call of government at every level and for every need. On the other hand, a strong society is where the need for official intercession is minimal, and people are in charge of their daily life, i.e., self-governance. This concept, which Gandhi expounded in his idea of village swaraj, can be found in

ancient texts like the *Rig Veda*, *Manusmriti*, *Arthashastra*, and the *Shanti Parva* of the Mahabharata.

The urgency for reviewing the Constitution

The Indian Constitution has to move from relative successes to substantial achievements. If a Constitution cannot be neutral, as is generally understood, it cannot also be everlasting.[17] Authors Thomas Ginsburg, Zachary Elkins, and James Melton, had this to say: "By our estimate, national constitutions have lasted an average of only seventeen years since 1789. This is an unsettling estimate of life expectancy for a document whose basic function is to express guiding national principles, establish basic rules, and limit the power of government—all of which presuppose constitutional longevity."[18] They also said, "Our results suggest that constitutions are most likely to be replaced around age 10, and one-half of constitutions are likely to be dead by age 18, and by age 50, only 19 percent will remain." In line with this median yardstick, our Constitution has had an extraordinary longevity. Compare this to the fact that ten years was also what Patel thought would be the life of the Constitution. And Nehru had also called it provisional.

The Indian Constitution, drafted at a perilous time in the wake of Partition when even the survival of the new nation was in question, has served its purpose. Indeed, with over a hundred amendments, including to its preamble, it is already a different Constitution, but its so-called 'basic structure' or framework and power paradigm, although serious flaws have surfaced, is still alive. Tensions have surfaced between rights and duties, Center and States,

one State and another, the judiciary and the executive, and between the citizenry and its proxies. Everyone has a cause to complain, citing the same Constitution. Nothing said or done is as it appears to be; all slogans are 'semantic subversions.' Moral outrage is missing in action. Worst of all, the democracy that the Indian Constitution put in place has morally enfeebled the people, the fountainhead of sovereignty. They have put themselves on the auction block; they are demanding their share of the spoils of a failed Constitution. The time is now to move on, bearing in mind what it has taught us, the most important being that there is an imperative to significantly altering the balance of power within its own construct, both vertically and horizontally. Recognizing that federal, quasi-federal or Westminster-style unitary models have proven to be simply untenable for a pluri-national state like India, we have to shift the basic philosophy with an accent on a confederation of autonomous local communities, which comes closest to the ancient Indian model.

It was the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee who revived the idea of reviewing the Constitution. In a 1996 speech, he said: "The present system of parliamentary democracy has failed to deliver the goods and… the time has come to introduce deep-going systemic changes in our structures of governance."[19] In 2000, the Government of India created the *National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution* (NCRWC) to "examine, in the light of the experience of the past 50 years, as to how best the Constitution can respond to the changing needs of efficient, smooth and effective system of governance and socio-economic development of a modern India within the framework of parliamentary democracy, and to recommend

changes, if any, that are required in the provisions of the Constitution without interfering with its basic structure or features." The Commission, to its credit, produced scathing insights and a number of far-reaching recommendations, but its report was simply shelved. Shockingly, the report was never even placed before the parliament. Twenty odd years since, the NCRWC's final words are even more relevant and urgent now: "It is a sad fact that a needlessly harsh, lugubrious, unimaginative and indifferent administration has pushed the poor to the wall. The people of India are more divided amongst themselves than at the time of the country's independence. If remedies are not found and implemented speedily there might remain very little of value to salvage. There is a pervasive and cynical disbelief that anything will change at all… There are more failures than successes making the inference inescapable that the 50 years of the Working of the Constitution is substantially a saga of missed opportunities."[20]

The NCRWC consisted of some very erudite and eminent people such as Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah, Justice R.S. Sarkaria, Soli Sorabjee, Abid Hussain, etc., and their labors of over two years should not go down the drain. Our 'authoritarian' Prime Minister Narendra Modi should revive the NCRWC's report, examine not only its recommendations but also the wealth of analysis contained in its voluminous report (1979 pages) in the light of 20 years of subsequent experience, invite public debate and other parties' suggestions, involve the Supreme Court to preempt future complications, and do what no Prime Minister before could do, in order to 'rehabilitate' democracy in India. And he doesn't have to start all over afresh. Fortunately, not all of the report's recommendations need constitutional

amendment; actually, 86 involve legislative measures, and the rest involve executive action. The latter action can be taken if they are still found to be possible and desirable. The Supreme Court is the creation of the Constitution, but also its enforcing agent. And a constitutional democracy, although only in theory, is supposed to represent the calculus of common consent of the people. That is what 'we, the people' signifies and symbolizes.

Democracy is a framework wherein the sovereign force lives in the possession of the everyday citizens to run the nation through the chosen delegates. But that is only in theory. As one quipped, 'in India, people are thought of first as consumers, and second as citizens, and nobody seems to have a problem with that characterization.' In giving the Constitution to themselves, the people also implicitly retain the power to change it or even give themselves a new framework more responsive to new demands and challenges. We must understand that a constitution of a country is a holistic, mutually reinforcing whole, not an arbitrary assemblage of various disparate organs and verbose articles.

Extra-constitutional power centers

Any careful consideration of the working of the Indian Constitution over the past seventy odd years is incomplete without taking note of one major development: the emergence of 'extra-constitutional' or 'unconstitutional' power centers in the country. There are two kinds: (1) those that are not explicit creations of the Constitution but are compatible and consequential; and (2) those created by the legislature to act as a check on constitutional bodies.

The first kind are bodies such as the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), and the second kind are such institutions as the *Lokpal* and *Lokayuktas*. It is the latter type that is a cause for concern. The problem is not only in the product but also the process. The product is flawed because it compromises a democratic principle, and the process is flawed because it was driven by the paramount need to mollify a popular public outcry against corruption in high places. The merits and demerits were not weighed dispassionately and rationally. Time and again, the Indian State has shown it cannot stand up to any sustained, organized, and popular disruption of public order. The absurdity is that while the *Lokpal Act* has the overarching power to investigate everyone in the public service, including the Prime Minister, the proposal to give it a constitutional status was voted down. At the same time, we may make the process so difficult that it takes almost superhuman effort to implement it. We lose both ways: one, we demean the office; two, we make it virtually ineffective. The larger paradox is that we cannot, on the one hand, swear by the sanctity of the Constitution, and, on the other hand, try to circumvent it. In one way, the Constitution is being subverted not only on the street but also by the political system. In a democracy, only the people should have the power to punish their elected representatives, and if periodic elections are not sufficient, other means like recalls should be considered.

The real 'sanctity' is not about the Constitution itself but about the sovereignty of the people. We have a tendency to ignore integrity while choosing our representatives and rulers, and then expect them to act with integrity in power. We abet corrupt elections and expect clean politics. The other

form is individuals exercising decision-making influence behind the scenes in the working of the government. During the Emergency, we had a son of a prime minister wielding such power; we had the President of the Ruling Party exercising such power over an 'accidental prime minster'. We now have the son of a party president, who relinquished power as party president following an electoral defeat, only to wield such power from his mother who herself is an interim party president. Indeed, 'family' has become very important in the politics of India. The dynastic phenomenon is present at the national, state, regional, and district level. The Nehru–Gandhi family has produced three Indian Prime Ministers, and members of the family have largely led the Congress Party since 1978. In addition, other national and regional parties such as the Shiromani Akali Dal, Shiv Sena, Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Janata Dal Secular, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Jammu & Kashmir National Conference, All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen, the Bharat (formerly 'Telangana') Rashtra Samithi, and the Nationalist Congress Party are all led and dominated by families.

While this is a reality, the question of what it implies, means, and entails has been a matter of much debate. Some say it is unfair to single out politics while family member involvement is widespread in sports, movies, and many professions. Progeny tend to emulate their parents. In India, the family has always been a big player; that is the strength of Indian society. Then again: What is a 'family'? Where do you draw the line when it comes to family involvement? Does it mean only sons and daughters, or everyone, that is even those who are remotely related, what was once called 'joint family', which was a huge socially stabilizing factor?

According to the theory of karma, no birth is an accident; being born in a 'privileged family' means they are supposed to have that advantage. Life is unfair; it doesn't mean that without dynasty the most meritorious will rise up in politics. It is natural that children follow the footsteps of the parents, and for parents to give a helping hand. Ultimately, whether one succeeds or gets weeded out depends on one's character and caliber, and people's acceptance or rejection. Finally, if people are sovereign and can choose a known criminal or sports person or an actress, why shouldn't a politician's son or daughter be denied a chance? That would be reverse discrimination. Others argue that "dynastic politics is jeopardizing the concept of democratic socialism assured by the Constitution, and it simultaneously aggravates corruption and fascism in the Indian political system."[21] It is also posited that dynastic selection is inherently antithetical to the very idea of democracy, that it is undemocratic, and 'gives political inequality free rein'. In the balance, one can say that purely dynastic political power-grabbing is unhealthy but not undemocratic. Blasting and blaming a dynasty for the faults of our democracy is another populist ploy, and it lets us pass the buck, but hardly advances the cause of 'healthy' democracy. The fault line is far more fundamental, deep-rooted, and structural.

In addition, the manner in which our Constitution distributes power in the management of the country's economic and social resources is wholly askew. We could go as far as to say that the Indian Constitution is 'undemocratic', because it did not trust the institutional expression of the will of the people, the parliament, and instead gave a constitutional *carte blanche* to the unelected top judiciary. Further, it does not provide for a 'upward

movement of power from the base to the apex in the form of circles'. It provides for what is called the 'pyramidal' or trickle-down model of administration. It contravenes the basic principle that political power, to be responsible and responsive, must be ascending, not descending, bottom–up not top–down, and allegiance and accountability must be horizontal, not vertical. That means that elected bodies at each level control the executives, not the executives or elected bodies at a higher level. To keep it on its toes, political power has to be near, not distant. What is required is both political and economic 'autonomy' at every level. That is the only way to spur economic growth and to plug the ever-escalating imbalances and asymmetries in India. Everyone must have the powers and resources necessary—no more and no less—to discharge their responsibilities. It is not decentralization that we need; it is a more balanced constitutional distribution of powers between all elected bodies. The Constitution has taken away too much power away from the people and that must be rectified.

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The Center-State Conundrum

One of the disconcerting developments over the past 75 years, particularly since the plurality of power-sharing has become a dominant tenet in India polity, is the growing tension in the relationship between the Center and the States. The issue of center-state relations, long simmering,

is reaching a boiling point, and cannot be put away on the backburner. The Supreme Court must fulfil its constitutional responsibility and must step in. It is getting dirty and ugly with Chief Ministers openly abusing the Prime Minister. There is mounting criticism that the center is undermining the 'federal' structure and the financial autonomy of states. They complain that, 'in the name of concurrent lists, both Congress and BJP at the center have stolen all the powers of the states'. The states complain that the Union Government's governance in India is 'monolithic'; something, they say, even the British did not [have].[22]

While the ruling party at the center is unleashing central law enforcement agencies on political opponents, the state governments have begun to use their law enforcement agencies on central agencies. We could soon see a 'war of law enforcement agencies'. That will be catastrophic for center-state relations and for democracy. This is part of the generic deterioration in the political standards and practices that has come about in the wake of multi-party ministries in many of the states, party rivalries, political defections, horse-trading, and fragmentation of the political parties. In some states, the relationship between the governor and chief minister has become increasingly unbecoming, unseemly and adversarial. A litany of brazen battles across the states, openly factional positions on matters of national importance, and controversies involving the excesses of governors are ever more frequent now.[23] It is being described as a 'war of attrition'. Some Chief Ministers have come to look upon the Governor as a kind of 'spy' or lackey of the ruling party at the center. Recently, some Chief Ministers belonging to opposition parties wrote to the Prime Minister complaining that the 'needless interference'

of governors and their 'constant needling' is a gross misuse of their limited constitutional power under Article 167, without taking into cognizance other limiting Articles like 163v and 169. They cited the 'unbecoming conduct' of some Governors as a 'direct attack on the federal structure of our Constitution'. While Governors assert that they are doing their constitutional duty, the aggrieved Chief Ministers are saying that they are interfering and impeding their work as chief minsters. In one sense, both are right and wrong. The Constitution gave wide powers to governors, such as Article 258(A): "Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution, the Governor of a State may, with the consent of the Government of India, entrust either conditionally or unconditionally to that Government or to its officers functions in relation to any matter to which the executive power of the State extends." At the same time, the expectation is that they will remain non-political, non-partisan, and not to be carried away by the literal meaning of the formal powers given to them.

The crux of the problem is that misuse of many of the provisions is taking place because there is constitutional ambivalence and ambiguity, and everyone is interpreting the provisions to their own advantage. Few are acting in good faith, and consistent with the norms of 'constitutional morality.' With a Constitution like the one we have, with blurring boundaries and overlapping mandates, its effective functioning depends as much on the 'spirit' as well on the letter of what the 'book' entails. That kind of 'asymmetry' or ambiguity is perhaps inevitable, even necessary, in a country as multi-dimensionally divided as India. It is still an open question if this is a slippery road to secession or to national integration.

Center–state relations in crisis

Generally, it is assumed that with a written Constitution, there will be no room for chaos, misunderstandings, and conflicts between the center and the states who would seek to cross over each other's line of authority. That has not happened in India. Under Articles 245–263 of the Indian Constitution, the power between center and state is explicitly demarcated into legislative, administrative, and financial functions. In addition, the 7th Schedule of the Constitution is sub-divided into three lists—Union List, State List and Concurrent List, which gives comprehensive details on the law-making power of the Parliament and the State Assemblies. Despite such detailed divisions, the issue of center–state disputes has been a perennial one. Both sides blame each other and not without any reason. Basically, in its zeal to combine the 'best' of both unitary and federal systems, and to have a strong center and yet not any less strong states in their own territories, the formula the Constitution settled on has turned out to be a highway with numerous potholes.

It is worth noting in passing that it was this so-called paramount need to have a 'strong center' in free India that made Nehru unwilling to accept the Cabinet Mission Plan that could possibly have kept India as one country, but with a weak center. Even Nehru did not discover in his *Discovery of India*, that India was Bharat, and Bharat was never governed like a single homogenous entity. Like Nehru, the framers of the Indian Constitution were deeply concerned about ensuring the unity and integrity of the country. Instead of trying to find out how, despite being splintered into multiple kingdoms and republics, people had the emotional bonding to a 'unified' *Bharatavarsha*, they

assumed that the only way to make India into a coherent political entity was to emulate the Western way. The fallout was a Constitution that tried to reconcile contradictory pulls and pressures.

The Administrative Reforms Commission and several other Commissions were appointed by the Government of India from time to time to regulate center–state relations. The Union Government appointed the Sarkaria Commission (1988) to suggest ways and means to improve center–state relations. Despite all these efforts and reports, the potential tension in the center–state relationship has subsisted. In terms of political and administrative legitimacy, both share the same source: the Constitution of India. States, however, have far less financial freedom. The reality now is that the technique of augmenting financial resources of the states through fiscal transfers from the center has been found unsatisfactory. For states to function with any degree of autonomy, their avenues of taxation should be expanded to include fresh items.

The recommendation of the Venkatachaliah Commission was that "A *de facto* enumeration of services that can be taxed exclusively by the states should get priority from policy makers with a view to augmenting the resource pool of the states… An appropriate amendment to the Constitution in this behalf should be made to include certain taxes, now levied and collected by the Union, to be levied and collected by the states." This should be seriously considered. But then, it is another matter that the state governments are doing the same thing, indeed even worse, in regard to local bodies and panchayats, starving them of funds to do what they are expected to do. And the center should not be hamstrung in the exercise of its constitutional

duty to ensure that the affairs of a state do not endanger national unity or integrity. If its motives are demonstrably honest, it doesn't have to fear the Supreme Court, but often they are not.

One of the striking 'ambiguities' of the Indian Constitution is that it has at the state level, both an 'elected' chief minister and a federally 'appointed' governor. The possible point of friction is that the governor is the constitutional head of the state, and at the same time, he/she is also the representative of the center. The central government is duty bound under Article 355 to ensure that there is no failure of the constitutional machinery in the state. Although the issue has gained prominence in recent years, it has been simmering for a long time. Serious attempts have been made to mend matters. The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC), also known as the Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah Commission (2002), reiterated what the Sarkaria Commission (1988) said in many ways, as did the M.M. Punchhi Commission report (2010). It cited the Supreme Court verdict in the *Rameshwar Prasad and Others vs. Union of India* (2006) case: "When his [the governor's] credibility is at stake on the basis of allegations that he was not performing his constitutional obligations or functions in the correct way, it is a sad reflection on the person chosen to be the executive head of a particular state." Despite all this there is no improvement. Chief Ministers, by and large, want those who simply, even mindlessly, approve everything they do, and be, in the words of Gopalkrishna Gandhi, "a mere ornament, like the chandelier overhead or the carpet underfoot."[24] They do not want to be 'counselled' or be 'influenced' by governors on policy-making and to "prevent

mistakes by their cabinets", much like what even Gandhi thought they should.[25] Anyone who seeks to play that kind of role will be denounced as 'intrusive'. For a person to 'morally influence' without being accused of 'interfering' calls for a person of absolute integrity.

Firstly, the powers-that-be at the Center are unlikely to select such a person; they want to use that post as political reward, for someone who they can rely upon. Second, it takes two to tango; few chief ministers will find such a person an asset. Rarely, if at all, we can have chief ministers who act 'conscientiously', and governors who act 'constitutionally', to paraphrase Gopalkrishna Gandhi. At best, the Governor these days is a purely ceremonial figurehead, who has to play dead, and come to life in a constitutional emergency. Chief ministers will lavish them with praise, go out of the way to make them 'conveniently' comfortable. Is such a position worth all the bother and expense? Similarly, even if the political affiliations are the same, still there can be friction. The more fundamental issue is about how the position of a governor fits into the larger framework. What we should note is that dealing with this in isolation will do more damage. The need of the hour hinges on what he or she is supposed to do and how best that could be done. The issue should be considered within the larger context and the character of our Constitution. If it is fully federal, like in the USA, then we do not need a chief minister and the governor will be directly elected. If it is wholly unitary, then there will be a governor or chief minister who is appointed by the President.

There is another emerging issue relevant to center–state relations that receives little attention. Although the health of public finances in India will in great measure

depend upon the fiscal faithfulness of state governments, what we are witnessing is the growing fiscal irresponsibility of some state governments through 'populist' policies, and the inability of anyone to check it. The growing 'freebie culture' is one example. It has become a kind of 'competitive contagion'. In one year, it was estimated that state governments announced over Rs.1 trillion in welfare schemes and subsidies. A 2020 study found evidence of a close link between electoral cycles and fiscal populism, and between government fragmentation and fiscal profligacy. Additionally, it found that a strong opposition does not necessarily mitigate the fiscal populism of incumbent governments.[26] As the magazine *The Economist* observed, "Any amount of parental scrimping and saving is futile if the children run amok with the family credit card."[27]

Misuse of the central executive

While considering the powers of the central executive, we have to pay particular attention to what are called 'central agencies.' The list includes the Intelligence Bureau, the Narcotics Control Bureau, the Enforcement Directorate, the Central Board of Direct Taxes, the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, the Central Bureau of Investigation, the National Investigation Agency Cabinet Secretariat (RAW), etc. Although the center's misuse of central agencies is nothing new, it seems to have gained pace with the present powers that be in New Delhi. States are throwing out central agencies, annulling, defying, and not implementing laws passed by the parliament. The State Assembly of West Bengal even passed a resolution protesting against the alleged misuse of central agencies. If state after state

chooses which law of the land suits it or doesn't, and rejects laws that it doesn't like, then that constitutes nothing less than a challenge to the Constitution. That is when a *suo moto* intervention of the Supreme Court under Article 131 is eminently warranted. Each one suspects the other's bona fides. But strangely, our very wary and wide-awake apex court is silent. The issue is not simply political; the friction between center and states has adverse economic consequences; some states even see the failure of central schemes as politically advantageous. While care should be taken to ensure that the center should not unfairly encroach on the state's powers, it is also incumbent to unsure that states do not jeopardize the interests of their own citizens to settle partisan scores.

Our Constitution, with its asymmetric federalism, was expected to harmonize unity and autonomy, diversified powers and integrated application. It was described as an 'indestructible union of destructible states'. That is why, unlike in a federal set-up like the USA, the parliament has the unilateral power to create or merge or split states. As a result, what we have is 'conflictual federalism', not 'cooperative federalism'. The kind of federalism the Constitution opted for, designed with the best of intentions, is coming under severe stress because such a framework can work only when the constituent organs are faithful both to the letter and even more to the spirit of the Constitution. State legislatures are brazenly annulling laws passed by the parliament, but no one seems to think that there is anything to be concerned. *Prima facie*, this seems unconstitutional; in the Constitution it is said that if there is an inconsistency between the central and local laws on the same subject, the central law prevails, and further, the Constitution, unlike in

a federal system like that of the USA, vests residuary power in the center. Article 256 states that the executive power of every state is be so exercised so as to ensure compliance with the laws made by parliament. Moreover, Article 257(1) has declared that the executive power of every state shall be so exercised as not to impede or prejudice the executive power of the Union. The tendency to defy laws passed by parliament, whether one agrees with them or not, and the growing inter-state clashes over land or water can eventually bring the union under tremendous stress. We need a new *modus vivendi* and it is here that the judicial *suo moto* intervention will be welcome. Actually, it is one of the principal functions of the Supreme Court. The Original Jurisdiction of the Supreme Court establishes that it act as an umpire in all disputes regarding federal matters. In this capacity, the impartial Supreme Court not just settles disputes but also interprets the powers of the union and state governments as laid down in the Constitution. We should not look at this purely to make political points over the current dispensation in Delhi.

This is one of the modalities the Constitution provided for ensuring the stability and unity of the union—despite the fact that, as B.R. Ambedkar pointed out, "The States under our Constitution are in no way dependent upon the Center for their legislative and executive authority. The Center and the States are co-equal in this matter…" was to empower the President under Article 356 of the Constitution to take direct charge of a state. According to this 'emergency power', if a state government is deemed unable to function according to Constitutional provisions, the Union government can take direct control of the state machinery. Article 356 is a pivotal point around which most of the complex issues relating to

center–state relations revolve. Although it was a drastic step to be invoked, as clearly the Constitution intended with extreme care, caution, and purely as a very last resort, since Independence, particularly since 1970, the governments in Delhi have used it politically or too liberally. As a result, and following the Supreme Court in its landmark judgment in the *S.R. Bommai vs Union of India* case, the situation has become radically different. Although it acted as a check against arbitrary and politically-motivated dismissal of state governments by the center, it has also emboldened the states to defy the center on similar political grounds. The very argument the Court advanced to remove the threat of subjective dismissal—the chief minister of every state who has to discharge his constitutional functions will be in perpetual fear of the axe of Proclamation falling on him—has had another perhaps unintended consequence. Without such a 'threat' that the Constitution envisaged, a chief minister of an opposition party can also be guilty of the same misuse the court wanted to prevent from the center.

The situation is such now that, as former CJI Justice Madan Mohan Punchhi, chairman of the Commission on Centre State relations (2010) pointed out, "The Centre found itself hamstrung even when there was serious breakdown in law and order in some areas." The only remedy available to the center to constitutionally intervene, when it finds that something is seriously amiss in a particular state, is Article 356. The states can defy the center, fully aware that the center will not risk using the very power it is given, whatever the state does. The question is not who is right—center or state. The 'law of the land' has to prevail everywhere in India, if India is one nation. Politically too it could be counter-productive; there is a good possibility the people of

the state will vote back the same government, maybe with a higher majority. What it has perversely come to mean is that there is next to nothing any central government, or for that matter anyone else, can do against the chief minister of a state so long as he/she is in power.

Such a state of affairs has arisen because the framers of our Constitution, in their anxiety to avoid the sway of centrifugal forces and the risk of a weak center and rogue states, opted for a hodgepodge, with a 'Concurrent List' of as many as 52 items and, unlike in federal structures like the USA, the 'residual powers' are given to the center. [In the case of the USA, the powers not delegated to the states by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people]. The center has the power to make laws under the State List in certain cases. That is a major departure from federalism, intended to strengthen the union, and it was typical of our founders to selectively pick and paste from conflicting constitutions, which has created the situation we are in.

The basic paradox is that there cannot be a 'strong' center with 'starved states'. The fundamental principle is that constitutional bodies closest to the ground should have the maximum powers necessary for a responsive governance, and the farther they are from the ground, the less powers they ought to have. The states are closer to—and, as of now, have control over—the ground, and if they do not cooperate there is nothing the center can do.

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The Executive and Public Administration

The executive, in a constitutional democracy, is the operational arm of the government, and the one which, on a day-to-day basis, interfaces with the people. It discharges three duties: (1) it enables the people to exercise their choice in electing their representatives to the legislature by holding elections; (2) it implements the laws passed by the legislature; and (3) it carries out the orders passed by the judiciary.

The executive impacts on the quality of life of the people and therefore its effectiveness has a direct bearing on the economic growth and social stability of the nation. While it is normally divided into *political executive* and *permanent executive*, encompassing the duties all the way from the Prime Minister or Chief Minister to high-ranking officials, it also includes millions of faceless and anonymous government officials or 'servants'. It is how these officials do their assigned duties that determines how the government functions. Part of the reason why India has failed to achieve so many of its targets and timelines is that such officials have not done their duties as well as they should have, and successive governments have not given sufficient importance to their conditions and quality of work.

The judiciary comes into the picture when people cannot collegially settle their differences, and when legal rights guaranteed in the Constitution are at serious risk. The legislature is actually their surrogate, but once an election takes place, what happens there is only of implied interest to the people. However, the executive is a daily reality and life can be pleasant or unpleasant, safe or

risky as a result of how it interacts with us. The head of the executive at the central level is the Prime Minister, and at the state level, it is the Chief Minister. It is these two offices that function virtually as the chief executives, aided by the cabinet and the bureaucracy. Under the Constitution of India, the President is the nominal executive authority (*de jure*) and the Prime Minister is the effective executive authority (*de facto*). In other words, the President is the head of the state, while the Prime Minister is the head of the government. The Constitution does not contain any specific procedure for the selection and appointment of the Prime Minister. Article 75 only says that the Prime Minister shall be appointed by the President. However, this does not imply that the President is free to appoint anyone as the Prime Minister. Following the conventions of the parliamentary system of government, the President is expected to appoint the leader of the majority party in the Lok Sabha as the Prime Minister. But, when no party has a clear majority in the Lok Sabha, then the President may exercise his or her discretion in the selection and appointment of the Prime Minister.

The position of the Prime Minister is variously and contradictorily described all the way from *primus inter pares* ('first among equals') to the 'moon among the stars'. The Prime Minister wears many hats—the head of the government, the chief of the council of ministers, the leader of the Lok Sabha—but they are all interconnected. In India, as with many other things, we are ambivalent about the office of the Prime Minister. We are very confused about what kind of a Prime Minister we want—powerful or pusillanimous, activist or dilettante, authoritarian or amicable, centralizer or de-centralizer. We, at different times

and depending on who the incumbent is, either glorify or demonize or trivialize the office or the incumbent.

The structure of India's executive arm

The architecture of India's executive arm reflects the incongruities inherent in our Constitution. Whatever the Constitution formally states, what India effectively has today is an ambivalent amalgam: we have a President who is more than a figurehead but less than the chief executive; we have a Prime Minister who is virtually the chief executive but is an appointee of the President, and can also be dismissed by the President; we have governors who are the counterparts of the President but who have more ill-defined discretionary powers in relation to chief ministers, giving scope to potential conflict. The intent of the founders and spirit of democracy expects that those who are not directly elected by the people, like the President and governor, effectively let the 'elected' Prime Minister and chief ministers run the show, regardless of what impression a bare reading might give. If a President takes too seriously what the Constitution says about his/her powers, he/she will inevitably clash with the Prime Minister. In practice, over the years, both the positions of the Prime Minister and Chief Ministers have come to be more to play larger roles than the letter of the law provides—for example, the Prime Minister is virtually the Chief Executive Officer. So important is the office of the Prime Minister that, like in other parliamentary democracies, parties are officially naming a 'prime ministerial candidate' when there is no election to that post. Some have even come to call it a 'prime ministerial form of government', signifying how critical the

office has become in the contemporary kind of democracy. Even though India has a federal system, and many things that happen on the ground are within the 'state list', still the Prime Minister is held accountable. That is because he is now not only the effective head of the government but also the country's leader. However, he has to behave like a 'leader', not an office holder, however exalted. And that means he must 'lead' by powers of persuasion, not enforcement.

The practical difficulty is when the Prime Minister is also the leader of a political party that reveals an ideological agenda, and playing both roles without undermining either of them is like performing the mythical India rope trick. In fact, the present Prime Minister Narendra Modi's role has been that of a leader and top vote-getter of his party. Although perhaps in his view the two are separate and distinct in the popular mind, a Prime Minister cannot simply walk away from what he says wherever and whenever. But this paradox and dilemma is also institutional, and his predecessors, barring his immediate one, had to grapple with it in different degrees.

India has had 14 Prime Ministers in the last seventy-five years, although some were so short-lived that their mark on history was limited; some landmark decisions were taken by them, precisely maybe because not much was expected from them. When you know you have a short shelf life you feel liberated. The country has had the experience of extremes—extremely popular (Jawaharlal Nehru), extremely powerful (Indira Gandhi), and extremely weak (I.K. Gujral). We have had a Prime Minister (Manmohan Singh) who never won a direct election, but served two full terms with the real prime ministerial power in the hands

of the head of the ruling political party. The jury is still out over Narendra Modi. He is different from any of his predecessors: he is free from nepotism; truly from the lowest rungs of Indian society; he is outside the English-speaking elite of India; he is a man driven by an ideological mission, and the dream to reclaim India's past, and largely forgotten glory. The real problem is that if he or any Prime Minister in the future attempts to do something truly big, and wants to be a game-changer, he might not succeed because he does not have the commensurate constitutional powers. It is the states, in the final reckoning, that call the shots; they are the ones who control the delivery machinery at the ground level, and without their cooperation nothing can happen, either good or bad. The point is that democracy survived all of them, but it is now at a liminal moment. The next five years will be critical, and the Prime Minister of India after the 2024 general elections will have to be a transformational catalyst, one way or the other. And it is also already clear that this election will be the most fierce, no-holds-barred, possibly violent, ever, and all the divisive forces, internal and external will try to wreck it.

The right leadership, nation first

Liberal democracy as a means of collective self-rule, and the quality of leadership it has promoted, has revealed itself to be hollow in India. Democratically elected leaders routinely deprive people of their basic rights and liberties; they serve their own interests and those of corporate power, thus generating vast inequalities. Elections in India, through which people elect their proxies and leaders, have become raucous, vicious, mean, and vitriolic; and their toxic trail

lingers for long afterwards. It is about maintaining or gaining power, status, and money as a means to exert elite control over the political system. One begins to wonder whether Indian 'democracy' is too election-centric, and whether, to save democracy, it needs to invent another way to achieve the purpose of elections.

It is worthy of reflection that in the Athenian democracy, the belief was that *sortition* (selection by lottery) was the way to select political officials as a random sample from a larger pool of candidates. The Athenians believed sortition to be more democratic but not elections, and used complex procedures with purpose-built allotment machines (*kleroteria*) to avoid the corrupt practices used by oligarchs to buy their way into office. To be eligible to be chosen by lot, citizens self-selected themselves into the available pool, then had lotteries in the *kleroteria* machines. Aristotle clarifies: It is accepted as 'democratic' when public offices are allocated by lot; and as 'oligarchic' when they are filled by election. Jean-Jacques Rousseau echoed similar thoughts when he said, "It will be seen why the drawing of lots is more in the nature of democracy. In an aristocracy, voting is more appropriate."

It is as fair as it can be because it is inherently egalitarian—people saw others as equal to themselves and thus valued each other equally as human beings, respecting others not because of some superior qualities but for who they were. Sortition ensures rotation of leadership and its short term, together with randomness of selection, ensures that power is not entrenched, that status is not accumulated, that hierarchies are not encouraged, and that there is no elite group with special qualities from which leaders are selected. The real power remains with the people as a

whole; anyone of them can lead, and all of them can be involved in any significant decision or resolution of conflict. This idea of leadership prioritizes the notion of service and duty to the collective, and devalues merit, status, wealth or power acquisition by individuals which create political and economic inequalities between people.[28]

With what elections in India have come to mean—divisive, hostage to money and muscle power—maybe it is time to think of alternatives like sortition. And it is not as though this system is alien to India. One notable example is the kind of 'governance' that once existed in the village of Uttaramerur, in present-day Tamil Nadu. They used a system known as '*kuda-olai*' (leaves in a pot) where the names of candidates for the village committee were written on palm leaves and put into a pot and pulled out by a child. It is said that this practice is still prevalent in some Adivasi communities in states like Jharkhand.[29]

With a Constitution like the one we have in India, the real authority, anyone who aspires to lead, must earn the faith and confidence of the 'plebeian unwashed masses', even of those whose choice he/she was not. Whoever happens to occupy the high office of Prime Minister has to place the nation above his party, and more importantly, he must be seen and perceived to be doing so. If he does place his party above the nation, then that person will soon cease to be the Prime Minister. As a politician, he has to fight elections, but as a statesman he has to conduct himself while in office. However, in the rough and tumble of politics, it is not easy to keep the roles distinct. What a Prime Minister does, in an election or otherwise, carries weight, and electoral invective can come in the way of consensual governance. It is sometimes said that the difference between a politician

and a statesman is that a politician thinks about the next election, while the statesman thinks of the next generation. According to the author Hans J. Morgenthau, statesmen are political realists; they look at policy in terms of its effect on the nation.[30] It is due to two factors. One, people who matter prioritize their narrow personal or group interest over the common good. Two, the middling character and quality of the present political class, a relatively small group of activists who make their careers off politics, have an agenda of their own, the aggrandizement of their own power, from whom national leadership is drawn. The result is all the political parties are saddled with people for whom politics is their way to power. Since all governments are composed of such persons, the quality of the government too becomes both mediocre and amoral at best.

Reform of All-India Services

Any serious relook at the Constitution must include the role and working of the civil service, particularly the All-India Services, created by the All-India Services Act, 1951, as per the Article 312(2) in part XIV of the Constitution of India. Before all else, a bit of context is necessary, exceptionally about the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). In deciding to create the IAS, the Constituent Assembly did not view it simply as giving birth to an administrative body, or as an elite civil service, or a successor to the so-called steel frame, the *Indian Civil Service* (ICS). It wanted the IAS to be a critical link in the quasi-federal set-up that it chose over a full-fledged federal or entirely unitary form of Constitution. The Assembly could have easily, even more justifiably opted for a federal service, and let the states form their own state

equivalents. Prodded, even bullied by Sardar Patel, they, in the end, went for the IAS. It was hoped that the IAS would serve as an instrument that bound the union together. If in isolation, or if it is removed arbitrarily, there is a risk of triggering a ripple effect over the complex constitutional construction. Without this perspective, any kind of consideration of its role and future could make it miss the wood for the trees. The primary concern of the citizens in a good civil society is that their government must be fair, just, and people-friendly. For a government to be good, it is essential that their systems and sub-systems of governance are efficient, economic, ethical, and equitable at levels where it touches the lives of people. The administrative system must also be accountable, transparent, and responsive.

The test of good governance lies in the effective implementation of its policies and programs for the attainment of set goals. Good governance implies good implementation of government activities that are designed improve people's lives and efficient and hassle-free delivery of essential services. In the constitutional scheme of things, this is the assigned role and responsibility of the civil services. Accordingly, however well organized the 'political' side of the government, however wise its political philosophy and quality of leadership, these would be of little avail without a body of nonpolitical officials who are expert at assembling, sifting, and analyzing the knowledge necessary for sound political decision-making. It is a kind of permanent brain-trust, at the disposal of whichever political party happens to be in power. The civil service constitutes the permanent executive in the modern state, complementing, not competing with, the political executive. Although policymaking is the prerogative of the politicians in power,

the civil servant has a right to put forward the point of view of the department: to candidly express his opinion on the soundness of a course of action or policy proposed to be formulated. Even though it is not 'elected' by the people, the civil service too draws its legitimacy and authority from the same people. In that sense, the distinction between the two executives—political and permanent—is more blurred than clear-cut. Both are creations of the same Constitution with their own rationale. Therefore, any consideration or review of the civil services ought not to be in separation from this embedded context. It is an essential ingredient of the quasi-federal set-up of the Constitution. For it will be antithetical in a purely federal set-up, and superfluous in a wholly unitary construct.

As it so happened, this was one of the most contentious issues discussed in the Constituent Assembly, and what finally got incorporated was the result of a lot of animated argumentation. Many members thought it was repugnant to the federal form of governance. Sardar Patel—hailed as 'the patron saint' of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), the man who more than anyone else 'unified' India—vigorously argued that creating the All-India Services was essential for preserving that very unity, and at one point, even threatened to 'take the services with him and go'. He said: "There is no alternative to this administrative system… The Union will go, you will not have a united India if you do not have a good All-India Service which has the independence to speak out its mind, which has [the] sense of security that you will standby [sic] your work… If you do not adopt this course, then do not follow the present Constitution. Substitute something else… these people are the instrument. Remove them and I see nothing

but a picture of chaos all over the country" (Constituent Assembly, October 1949). He also said, "All we have been able to achieve, whether it be in the sphere of states or in Kashmir or in any other theatre, have been possible only because of their loyalty and wholehearted support" (15 Oct 1949).

It was Patel's passionate patronage that laid the foundation for the creation of the IAS in particular. It was in fitting recognition of that support that 21st April every year is observed as the 'Civil Services Day'—that was the day in 1947 when Sardar Patel, as the first Home Minister of Independent India, addressed the probationers of the first batch of Administrative Services Officers. Coming from a man who fought against, and sacrificed his life fighting the British Raj, whose chief symbol of oppression was the Imperial Civil Service (ICS), these words were both remarkable and prescient. B.R. Ambedkar too, in his speech of 4 Nov 1948, in the Constituent Assembly, pointedly said that the Draft Constitution had used three means to 'maintain the unity of the country'—a single judiciary, uniformity in fundamental laws (civil and criminal), and a common All-India Civil Service. The takeaway point from both Patel and Ambedkar was that the All-India Services, especially the IAS, are an essential and inseparable part of the Constitution, and inferentially, any draconian deconstruction of it might unhinge the constitutional construction.

The All-India Services (AIS) comprise three civil services: the Indian Administrative Service (IAS); the Indian Police Service (IPS); and the Indian Forest Service (IFS). The All-India Services Act (1951) provides for the creation of two more All-India Services, namely, the Indian Engineering Service, and the Indian Medical Service.

A particular feature of the All-India Services is that the members of these services are recruited by the center (union government in federal polity), but their services are placed under, or 'allotted to', various states. Even though they 'belong' to different state or union territory cadres, they come under the purview of the All-India Services Rules relating to pay, conduct, leave, various allowances, etc. While respective state governments have control over them in terms of their deployment, they can take only minimal disciplinary action against them without consulting the central government and the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). That was expected, on the one hand, to give them a sense of security to work efficiently and provide state governments with administrators of high quality. Of these services, the most visible and prominent is the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), the successor to the Indian Civil Service (ICS), and to a much lesser extent, the Indian Police Service (IPS), successor to the *Indian Police* (IP). This followed a decision that was taken by the central cabinet in 1946.

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Constitutional Reform: the Time Is Now

Clearly India needs a tectonic directional change, and that is not possible without a radical reform of its Constitution. Nothing else, nothing short of it, will do. If the Constitution of India, which is at the heart of Indian constitutional democracy, hasn't worked well, how can democracy be

any better? It is not that people in other constitutional democracies are hunky-dory with their democracies. There is disenchantment everywhere, barring perhaps a handful of countries like Scandinavia.

Take the case of the most powerful democracy in the world: the USA. There are many who think that its form of democracy is outdated and unsuitable to the present times. A 2016 book suggests that for America's troubles its Constitution is the main culprit, as in India's case. It is argued that its framers designed the Constitution some 230 years ago for a simple, agrarian society. As a result, the American government is ill-equipped to address the serious social problems that arise in a complex, post-industrial nation. The book posits that "We are prisoners of the past, burdened with an antiquated government that cannot make effective policy, and often cannot do anything at all."[31] In the instance of India, what has transpired is that the kind of democratic processes that the Constitution of India gave rise to, have proven to be ill-suited, ill-equipped, and incompatible with what it takes to make democracy in its true spirit work for its people. However distasteful and depressing it is, that has to be the verdict after 75 years of its working and after 17 general elections. If we fight shy of forthrightly acknowledging and acting on it, we cannot make the necessary course corrections and we will dither and drift and end up wherever it might be.

The time is now, to start the process of establishing the *Second Republic of India* with a fresh Constitution. It will be taxing and long-drawn-out, and will face formidable foes who either have much at stake in the *status quo* power structure, or will be fearful of what such draconian disruption might entail and yield. The political establishment is united

in opposition; each is afraid that any change might aid the opponents. They don't mind the ship sinking, and going down with it, when it can be saved with a change of the engine. More fundamentally, the Constitution of India has, so to speak, acquired a taste for its own continuance. Even though many iconic political leaders, cutting across party lines—from Indira Gandhi to Atal Bihari Vajpayee—have admitted the need for a new Constitution, and despite the recommendations of the Venkatachaliah Commission on constitutional reform, not even baby steps have been taken.

Lest we forget, the rough and tough conditions and context—exemplified by the chaotic end to the British Raj, the horror of Partition, the fears of imminent implosion of the Indian Union—was the context in which the architects created our Constitution. It was a rush job, intended to end the 'dominion status' which was what India had till the Constitution came into effect, and the framers had no time to do any 'original' thinking.

India's democratic roots go back eons, the cross-cutting core of which rested on localized power and bottom-up governance. But this was not a view shared by Ambedkar. He believed that the village represented regressive India, a source of oppression. He argued against panchayats as he was apprehensive about the continuation of the hegemony of high-caste Hindus which gave panchayats little prospects of success as institutions of self-government. Indeed, what we should remember is that, as Radhakumud Mookerji reminds us, "We owe to her [India's] system of local government the preservation of the integrity, independence, and individuality of Indian culture, despite the world shaking and catastrophic political movements to which that culture was frequently exposed in the course of her history."[32]

That provided a sort of "Noah's Ark in which were safely protected the vital elements of Hindu civilization against the overwhelming political deluges that swept over the country from time to time."[33] It is hard to believe that this was the spirit, if not the structure and substance, that our founding fathers overlooked. And this was what Gandhi tried to infuse in his own vision of free India's Constitution. One member, a fervent Gandhian, Brajeshwar Prasad, opposed the idea of associating Gandhi's name on the ground that the Constitution they were adopting 'was not a Gandhian constitution' but a 'rotten constitution'.

It is now abundantly evident that that grave lapse lies at the root of every problem, structural, political, economic, social, and crisis India is facing. Almost every constitutional process or organ is in disrepute or disarray. The Constitution we live under is not something we can learn to live with, like Covid or climate change. It is also becoming clearer every day that none of the aspirations, ambitions and goals that we want to attain will be even remotely possible if we persist in following a dated and ill-suited Constitution, particularly in a totally morphed political context. Unless basic constitutional reform is given the focus it needs, every other effort is tantamount to tilting at the windmills.

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Politics, Parliament, and Parties

In its widest sweep, the word 'politics' covers the actions or activities concerned with achieving and using power in a country or society. Aristotle can be regarded as the first to introduce the term through his observations about human politics that he called *zoon politikon*. With the term, he wanted to clarify that the nature of political and social life in the interaction between two or more people would certainly involve political relations. He saw politics as a natural tendency of human beings which cannot be avoided.

In democratic India, politics has subordinated the quest for justice. It has steered away from 'progressivism' and is barely distinguishable from populism. Worse, the words 'playing politics' has become synonymous with 'playing dirty'. A great deal of responsibility for the overall moral degradation of post-Independence India must be laid at the door of politics. Indeed, even politicians blame or pass the buck to politics for their own moral misbehavior. So much so, almost everything that has gone wrong is often ascribed to 'politicization'. By its very nature, political power—'merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another' as described by Karl Marx—is both seductive and addictive, enticing and entrapping, and more than generic power, it is easily corruptible. It gives access to unparalleled trappings of privilege, prestige, and patronage, and when that is also seen as a way to instantly access money and muscle power, it becomes an irresistible impulse. In India,

what Samuel Johnson said about patriotism applies equally to politics: 'the last refuge of the scoundrel'. It is the short-cut not only to power per se and its perks, but also, more temptingly, to power over other people. That earns not only respect but also fear. Instantly, when one becomes a VVIP, all doors open, all limits are allowed to be crossed.

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The Inseparable Trio—
Parliament, Politics, and Parties

In any modern democracy, the trio of parliament, politics, and political parties occupy its central space. How they function largely determines how healthy or sick the democracy is. Of these, in the context of our nation, the most important is the Parliament of India, the highest policy-making body, and the closest approximation of the people's voice, will and wish, the institutional channel through which the consent and trust of its citizens is expressed, the bedrock of its legitimacy. It is the medium and intermediary, nexus and axis, between the governed and the government. It is 'the most exact transcript of the whole society and 'a portrait of the people in miniature'.

The bitter truth is that, despite functioning for over 75 years, our parliament has fallen far short of its premise and promise, assumptions and expectations, niche and norm. This is of the utmost importance. The dormancy and disrepute of the parliament makes democracy in India as good as dead. The role of the parliament, even more of its

individual members, is both marginalized and emasculated. The vice-president and chairman of Rajya Sabha once remarked that public representatives have become a laughing stock owing to their conduct. That is a strong indictment, but an inconvenient truth. The basic point should not be forgotten that, although it is a composite body, it is composed of individuals representing groups of citizens spread across the length and breadth of India with diverse interests and needs and priorities.

This intricate relationship was best expressed by Edmund Burke, the famous 18th-century British parliamentarian and philosopher: "Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole."[1] General good cannot be achieved unless all pertinent aspects and alternatives of any issue are articulated and deliberated upon before decisions are taken. It means that even if a particular party or parties are voted to power by the people, they cannot assume that they have the people's mandate to do whatever they deem fit.

The imperative of 'discussion' is most critical in a deliberative body like the parliament. Instead of 'deliberation', what we have nowadays is din, demonstration, and disruption. One would like to think that such parliamentary misbehavior has a high political cost. On the contrary, many a member seems to think that there could be gain and no pain. There is a need to build new conventions,

and all political parties must realize that a parliament that is a laughing stock will eventually undermine its own credibility.

A model 'code of conduct' must be drawn up, and anyone who transgresses it must be exemplarily taken to task by the Speaker. In practice, voting in the parliament must be the culmination, not the sum and substance, of democratic decision-making. It must be preceded by broad-based consultations in and outside the legislature. We can learn a lesson from Denmark, which also has a multi-party system. It is said that 'four post-war coalition governments have enjoyed a majority, but government bills rarely become law without negotiations and compromise with both supporting and opposition parties…' It is also said that on many issues, the political parties tend to opt for cooperation. It is common practice for both sides of the Danish political spectrum to cooperate in the *Folketing*, the Danish Parliament. That enhances the prestige of the parliament. In India, there is no constituency for consensus-building or for free-flowing discussion of policy options.

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The Political Party

The purpose of a political party is to acquire state power in the service of some stated and shared social agenda. To legitimize this aspiration, the party must be seen to be a microcosm of society, with its organization necessarily populated by individuals on a volunteer capacity as opposed to employees in a company. Although democracy

and political parties are two facets of the same reality, the profusion of parties in India makes representative and responsible power-sharing far more complex. The number of parties contesting in the Indian general elections—where nearly a billion voters cast their ballots in millions of polling stations—has jumped from 29 in 1962, to 669 in 2019, a rise of nearly 2,200%. Over 90% of those that have contested the general elections have never won a single seat.

There are multiple parties in power at the center and in the states as a part of coalitions, composed of parties with nothing in common ideologically or substantively. In one sense, that can be seen as a testament to the strength and resilience of Indian democracy. But it also means that the same two parties can be allies in one place and adversaries in another, and each party can have different electoral constituencies in different parts of India, potentially creating situations of 'conflict of interest'. The idea of parties which have nothing in common except to defeat another party is an Indian phenomenon. Unfortunately, in India, parties switch positions and elected representatives switch parties unabashedly, notwithstanding anti-defection laws, primarily because there is no political price or public wrath to be incurred.

Pandemonium has become another name for the Indian Parliament. It now acts not as a solemn deliberative body for law-making, but as a platform for the demonstration of MPs' power to paralyze and disrupt. No party or MP fears that there is any political cost to pay for disrupting parliament; if any, there is much to gain by the publicity! If we are to save Indian democracy from decline and dissolution, we must rescue our parliament from growing redundancy and ridicule.

An effective and vigilant opposition in a democracy has a vital role to play; everyone agrees, including the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice of India (CJI). The lament is the lack of adequate space for the opposition in the nation's political scenario and in particular the lack of democratic discourse in parliament. Some are apprehending that Indian democracy may be heading towards an 'opposition-free India'. As Jaswant Singh observed: "In the functioning of our kind of representative, participatory form of government, since the late Indira Gandhi's premiership, a very disturbing trend has come into being. It is the rendering impotent of any kind of substitute, even of any contrary viewpoint or a thought that opposes, indeed, the very concept of opposition. What is even more disturbing is that, to an alarming extent, such a devaluation of the opposition has now become the objective of our democracy."[2] But how does one operationalize it in a multiple-party parliamentary governance?

A parliamentary form of governance implicitly implies majoritarian governance. The problem therefore is the 'parliamentary form'; we cannot swear by it and bad mouth how decisions are taken in parliament. How a government uses that majority is another matter. A matter of grave concern is that while the spotlight is on the parliament, the functioning of the state legislatures hardly makes national news. The fiscal situation of some states is in a debt trap but nothing tangible can be done constitutionally, short of imposing president's rule. If a bank cannot be allowed to fail and has to be rescued for public good, who can allow a state to go bankrupt? It is a kind of successful blackmail but there is no public hue and cry. Nearly every square kilometer of India is governed by the states. India's states are as huge and

populous as many independent nations. The track record of the state governments in engaging in the sacred process of democracy is shocking. It is a testimony to indifference and insufficient public attention. The governance at the state level makes maximum difference to the lives of people is subsumed in the work of the state assemblies. They are held responsible for allocation of public funds and tax payers money.

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Coalition Dharma

When the era of single-party dominance ended and coalition governance came to play in India, it also brought in a new dynamic, called the 'coalition dharma', a phrase coined by A.B. Vajpayee, to describe in a nutshell, the compulsions of coalition politics. Incidentally, his government was also the first coalition government to complete its full term, 1999–2004. It became a codeword for unprincipled compromises and 'honorable' cover to stay in power for the spoils of politics sans morality. Actually, coalition governments had been in vogue even before our 'tryst with destiny', when the Congress took the Muslim League as their coalition partner. Our very first government—until the first election took place—had members of diverse ideologies in the Nehru ministry. For almost 25 years before 2014, the country was run by coalitions and some major policy and strategic shifts took place during that time, like economic liberalization, the Pokhran II nuclear tests, and the Indo-US Nuclear Deal.

But each of them exacted a hefty price, ethical or practical. Even when a political party commands absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, like the BJP presently, it still sees political advantage in nominal 'power-sharing'. The bottom line is that even without a formal coalition, government coalition culture and dharma will continue to dominate Indian politics. That is because every party in power likes to claim that its government is broad-based.

That, in turn, brings us to the larger question: how has this affected the quality of liberal democracy in India, or rather the rise of illiberal democracy? In one sense, this enables a much broader cross-section of the people of India to participate, through their representatives, in the governance of India. People's views and interests could be better 'represented' in policy-making. On the other hand, the very act of balancing so many colliding views and interests could make it more difficult to safeguard the overall national interest.

Once a coalition comes to life, the overarching effort will then become to keep it alive, at any cost or through compromise. The coalition partners strive to obtain maximum mileage to further their own party interests. The regional parties sharing power at the center while lacking broad national outlook also work in favor of their regional aspirations, often at the cost of a coherent national vision. The regional parties develop the hubris of being king-makers and at times put the coalition on the brink. Since everyone wants to cling to power, that could easily lead to the very sin that legislators are being accused of: horse-trading, at the party level. We have to drastically reduce the number of political parties that can legally exist. We must stop small, splinter parties based on individual personalities

rather than on any ideology, and facilitate proper political conduct devoid of opportunism. Appropriate laws have to be amended.

It is important, at this point, to derive some clarity on the role of a political party in a representative democracy. Political parties are integral to democracy. There have always been varied views. Some say that they are purveyors of the public good. Some suggest that they are 'an unpleasant reality, a hardy weed that sprouts up in what would otherwise be the well-tended garden of democratic institutions.' And there are some who attribute the shortfalls of democracies on the absence or weakness of political parties. In India, "a party is all-too-often a label of convenience which a politician adopts and discards as frequently as a Bollywood film star changes costume. Hopping from one to the next—which would send shock waves through the political system in other parliamentary democracies—is commonplace, even banal, in our country."[3] Some characterize them as "an enclave of families, a ghettoized piece of nostalgia, or an embodiment of narcissism."[4]

There is another phenomenon: the growing hold of 'lumpens' on the political class in India. This brings to mind what a staunch opponent of Indian Independence warned in the British House of Parliament (June 1947): "Power will go to the hands of rascals, rogues, freebooters; all Indian leaders will be of low caliber and men of straw. They will have sweet tongues and silly hearts. They will fight among themselves for power and India will be lost in political squabbles."[5] One can of course dismiss Churchill's rant on India as akin to the devil quoting the scripture, but one must acknowledge that the way our leaders have been behaving, he was not all wrong.

India needs to evolve a new 'political culture', a set of shared views and value judgments applicable to our political system, built around the following principles: (1) the state should serve, not lord over, civil society; (2) political parties must give equal opportunities to everyone to rise up to leadership positions, enable the best talent in each generation to rise to the top; (3) political parties, even those that are primarily regional, must not compromise national purpose; (4) parties must profess and present a lofty vision and timeless values that can attract and inspire the youth of India, who are now adrift and searching for an uplifting purpose; and (5) they must offer a blueprint to shed the mindset of mediocrity that is at the heart of India's laggardness and underachievement.

By competing in elections, parties offer citizens a choice in governance, and while in the opposition, they can hold governments answerable. By playing respective roles, which are inherently interchangeable, they are expected to make governance responsible and responsive. When citizens join political parties, volunteer their time, donate money and vote for their leaders, they are exercising their basic democratic rights. Participation of citizens in political parties offers bountiful benefits, including opportunities to influence policy choices, choose and engage political leaders, and run for office.

From a different vantage point, a political party is a medium or platform through which the people can speak to the government and have a say in the governance. Political parties influence public opinion and, in turn, get influenced. Parties even offer access to government machinery and a local party leader can serve as a link between the citizen and the government officer. To be able to play such a bridging

role in a democracy, these parties must themselves practice democracy within their own organizations and internal decision-making, which unfortunately is not true. Even MPs do not have any autonomy or authority to question their party leadership, consistent with the views of the people in their constituencies.

The process of choosing the party leadership, like the presidency of the party, is often a charade, controlled by a cabal or dynastic group. That reduces them to the position of cheerleaders and sycophants. Without inner-party democracy, political parties can hardly safeguard national democracy. In his concluding remarks before the Constituent Assembly, B.R. Ambedkar opined: "The Constitution can provide only the organs of State such as the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. The factors on which the working of those organs of the State depends are the people and the political parties they will set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their politics."[6] And yet, "It is astonishing to note that the 'right to form political parties' or any provision regulating the functioning of political parties, do not form part of the Constitution. It is, thus, imperative to constitutionalize political parties for the effective functioning of democracy in India."[7] But the Constitution itself is almost wholly the product of a single political party, the Indian National Congress.

In India, we have got used to using words that are directly contrary to what we intend. One such word is 'representation'. A 'representative' is defined as 'standing or acting for another especially through delegated authority'. In other words, such a person is virtually a 'mouthpiece' of the people in a particular area, and puts forward the wishes and views of those who, because of numbers, cannot

directly participate. But he should not be a mere rubber stamp and play to the gallery. Way back in the 18th century, Edmund Burke put it in perspective: "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion… his will ought to be subservient to yours. If that be all, the thing is innocent. If government were a matter of will upon any side, yours, without question, ought to be superior. But government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment, and not of inclination; and what sort of reason is that, in which the determination precedes the discussion; in which one set of men deliberate, and another decide; and where those who form the conclusion are perhaps three hundred miles distant from those who hear the arguments?"[8]

The phrase 'elected representative' in the democratic world carries an almost hallowed legitimacy. In India, it is a kind of double whammy that our democracy operates under. The party representative does not represent the party at the constituency level, and he or she, once elected, does not act as the surrogate of the electorate. Phrased differently, legislators in our country represent their parties and not necessarily the will of their constituents. Basically, what has gone wrong is a kind of reversal of roles. The *Arthashastra* says, "For good governance, all administrators, including the king, are considered servants of the people."[9] In India, the 'servant' behaves like the master, and the master is too willing to be 'mastered'.

Politics in India is dangerously diseased with the advent of political 'poaching', party defections, and unapologetic bribing, before and after elections, and the toppling of elected governments, a phenomenon called '*Aya Ram,*

Gaya Ram', what the Supreme Court called 'horse-trading in MLAs'. What we have to acknowledge is that, despite the addition of the 10th Schedule to the Constitution to curb political defections motivated by the lure of office or other similar considerations which endanger the foundations of our democracy, the 'endangerment' continues unabated. The coalitions that the electorate votes for, not uncommonly break up after the elections and, shamelessly, the parties join hands with their opponents and form governments. And they do so confident that there is no political price to pay, and people will not punish them at the next elections by which time different factors come into play. People can no longer be sure how long the person they voted for will be true to his political allegiance. But one cannot enforce better behavior through legislation.

After seventeen general elections and many more at the state level, the message is loud and clear—everything that can divide and embitter the people becomes an electoral tactic. They bring out the worst in both the politician and the public. These divisions, particularly caste, themselves could be both the cause and consequence of economic backwardness. If India wants to become a truly prosperous nation, then these divisions should dissolve, or at least cease to be as dominant and destructive as they still are. Money blurs all boundaries and discrimination.

Such factors are corrupting the political process as well as the very purpose of elections, which is that people choose their representatives based solely on merits and political affiliation. What is heartening is that, despite all this, to a very large extent, particularly at the national level, the final outcome of all elections has proved to be the right one. Voters, even in the remotest village, seem to

have developed a 'sixth sense' about what is good for the country.

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Centralized Political Power: the Unchanged State of the Common Man

There is little doubt that the standard of living in much (but not most) of India is much better now, even compared to the 1970s and 80s. And yet, the Indian state has, inexcusably and shamefully, failed to fulfill its basic duty.

The way politics, economics and prioritization and policy-making have intersected and impacted on each other has been such that it has left no room for putting into effect the most basic test of public policy: what is called Gandhi's *Talisman Test*: "Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *swaraj* [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?"[10] In our race for growth and development, the nation has sidelined the poorest and the weakest, who actually make our living possible, like our domestic help, plumbers, gardeners, sweepers, among others. It has ignored the dictum that "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."[11]

The state has become too powerful but it has failed to remedy imbalances, to stand by the weak and stand up to the over-powerful. And it has failed to wisely use its monopoly on the use of force internally to protect citizens on occasion from each other, often siding with the unjust. In a consumerist culture driven by social media, we seem to have forgotten basic values like kindness, compassion, and empathy. The plight of the marginalized as articulated by Gandhi remains pathetic, and in fact, it seems to be widening in his own homeland. While those in the mainstream are having a wide range of opportunities and space for enrichment, the excluded and exploited in post-Gandhi India continue to remain shackled and voiceless. Those at the bottom of the heap are continuously facing the violation of their right to live with dignity and discrimination in different forms. Fair play and justice continue to delude and elude a large number of them across the country.

One of the great failings of Indian democracy is in the realm of social justice, although justice is enshrined in the preamble itself; people simply do not get what they deserve. Contrarian standards and norms apply to the rich and the poor, the powerful and the vulnerable. That is because we cannot fix the problems of the state without fixing the problems of society, and vice versa. What we must understand is that much of what is wrong with India—inequality, inequity, insensitivity, injustice, indifference, intolerance—is due not only to ill-conceived and badly executed policies of the state and its institutions; the fact is that they also enjoy the silent support of large sections of the self-satisfied middle class.

What a noted British historian, John McDonnell said about the test of civilization applies in good measure to the

morality of the middle class: "The degree to which men are sensitive to wrong-doing and desirous to fight it." Most of them operate from a default mode of self-centeredness and conclude that it would be self-defeating not to focus primarily on getting our own needs met, even at the expense of others, since that appears to be how the world around operates.

This is perhaps one of the most worrying aspects of India today—the middle class, who position themselves as the epitome of modernity and progress, are at the cutting edge of moral laxity and social insensitivity. Traditionally, in any society, the middle class is the pace-setter and its growth lightens the line between the rich and the poor. A 'full democracy' like Denmark is described as if it is 'just one big middle class'. The middle class, in all democracies, has been a potent political and economic force and catalyst. When economic liberalization arrived in India in the 1990s, it was assumed that it would not only enhance its strength but play a transformative role in propelling the economy on the one hand, and cleansing the Augean stables of society by pressuring the polity to face off political purchasability and transcend narrow identity politics on the other hand.

Sadly, that hope has been elusive. One in every three Indians is 'middle class' in India. But if the burgeoning class symbolizes the moral decline of the people, then who can bell the cat? The rich are too much in thrall of making money at any cost, and the poor are too consumed to make both ends meet. The very phrase 'middle class morality', once known for thrift, frugality, hard work, self-discipline, honesty, aspiration and ambition, now stand for unquenchable thirst for conveniences, comfort, and consumerism, and moral insensitivity.

What prevails in India, regardless of who sits on the *gaddi* in Delhi, is the reverse: 'political power' is with the oligarchy or plutocracy or the 'corporatocracy', or a blend of all three. The 'extractor class' owns the country, not the 'contributor class'. A cabal of elites call the shots. In a democracy, everyone cannot be a participant in decision-making, but people want to feel heard and listened to, and that what they say weighs in. Just knowing or trying to know 'the other side' greatly reduces rancor and enhances concord and cooperation. Decisions by consensus is the essence of democracy. Democracy is a system of politics that has disagreement at its heart. Part of being democratic is also to stop conflicts becoming destructive. Conflict is not necessarily bad; it is a part of plurality. Expecting that everybody has to be like-minded is anti-democratic. The need to arrive at a 'consensus' arises because there is conflict. And conflict arises because human beings have what is characterized as 'unsocial sociability'.

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Divisive Political Diversity—
Is the Collapse Imminent?

Shorn of shibboleths and robbed of all ifs and buts, the stark truth is that, even to break the causal nexus and vicious circle of moral decadence, mediocre mindset, mass malnourishment, chronic underperformance, jobless growth, corrosive culpability, etc., India requires nothing short of a transformational shift in its constitutional scheme, political

paradigm, economic orientation and social norms and cultural values. For that, we need a national conversation and consensus on what kind of goals we should set ourselves to achieve and the inevitable trade-offs we are prepared to make to that end. One such trade-off is to how to harmonize our perception about our past and vision of our future. In short, what kind of citizens and society we want to be.

If we want to actualize what our Prime Minister visualized, "When 130 crore people take one step ahead, the nation moves 130 crore steps," we need to re-imagine and re-create a new brand of social contract, with a better balance between rights and duties, power and responsibility, liberties, and rule of law, encompassing both citizen and the state. If we adopt an ostrich-like (ignore the unpleasant reality) or Micawber-like (expect that things somehow will turn okay) attitude, India could slither towards what Amartya Sen called 'collapse of the nation'. Some, like former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh are raising parallels with the collapse of the Soviet Union if things are allowed to drift further. While it may sound far-fetched, we should also factor in, given the growing and daring defiance of state authority by street power, 'state collapse', defined as 'the breakdown of government authority in maintaining law and order'. Or, it may not quite qualify as a 'collapse' and it can linger and lumber on like an ailing elephant, neither fully alive or not-yet-dead, a soft target and easy picking.

The result is a gnawing gulf between the perceptions and priorities of the people at large, and the policies and actions of their supposed representatives. Political affiliation has colonized and infiltrated the whole of social life. No one could have summed it up better than Jaswant Singh, a

nine-time parliamentarian and who occupied some of the highest political positions: "I carry a conviction that the single greatest factor of damage to the integrity of the Indian nation has been the Indian politician… Yet, I do think a beginning of our endeavor lies in reducing the importance of the politician and politics as such in our nation's life."[12] It is a stunning indictment coming from such a senior and generally well-regarded politician.

The dilemma is that on the one hand, greater public political activism is good, but, on the other hand, it is widening the hiatus between public life and moral living. The stigma attached to the politician has infected what ought to have been an honorable avocation: politics. The political realm in a democracy occupies an elevated position in the public square, and if politicians are seen as bereft of decency and moral integrity, it shakes public confidence in democracy itself. But at the end of the day, people must take responsibility for our politics. We cannot wish or wash it away. But does that make India ineligible to be a modern democracy? Indeed, India's "vision of cooperative self-government often produced republicanism and even democracy comparable to classical Greek democracy."[13] Some even assert that it would "not be wrong to say that the principle of democracy is originated from the Vedas."[14] As Romila Thapar puts it, "We have been so much accustomed to read and hear of monarchy in India being always and invariably unfettered and despotic, that the above conclusion [that republics were important in ancient India] is apt to appear incredible to many as it no doubt was to me for a long time."[15]

The sad part is that India itself has forgotten its own enlightened and egalitarian past, and the popular

impression was allowed to be spread that India became a 'democracy' after Independence. Democracy was never the issue at independence; what kind was the choice. Once Sardar Patel, through a stupendous effort, succeeded in the political integration of India, bringing under its fold more than 550 princely states, there was no way India could have been governed other than 'democratically'. No king or emperor or an autocrat could rule India. Part of the colonial psyche we imbibed was to almost emulate our just-departed masters reflexively in deciding how best to give shape and structure to the basic principles and laws of the new nation, its Constitution. In so doing, India's own models of democracy that survived the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires for thousands of years were overlooked, which is the root cause of much of what went wrong in the post-Independence past. Our democracy is malfunctioning not because of operational glitches alone, but due to a design deficiency, due to our Constitution's utter and comprehensive unsuitability and inappropriateness. The game-changer India needs is a total constitutional make-over and finding a wholly varied way to select our representatives.

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Has Political Freedom Come True?

When India became free from the colonial yoke and adopted a new Constitution, we assumed that it would automatically lead to political freedom, which we mainly made synonymous with the freedom to freely choose our

rulers and freedom from unreasonable external constraints on action. Since we measured up to that standard, we got self-satisfied. It has taken 75 years to realize that we went doubly wrong; in misinterpreting and, in consequence, getting complacent. First, political freedom is far more broad-based—it is 'freedom from oppression or coercion, the absence of disabling conditions for an individual and the fulfillment of enabling conditions, or the absence of life conditions of compulsion, e.g., economic compulsion, in a society.' The question is: from this broader perspective, how politically free has India been or is? The answer depends largely on the political and ideological affiliations of the person asking the question, and that can lead to divergent answers. Our elections, the fundamental political freedom to choose our potentates, have brought out the worst in us, and have brought us to a stage when we have to make a terrible choice: elections or democracy.

The other 'freedom', to say or do whatever one wants to, subject only to public good and order, has been misused and abused both by the political masters and the public. The rule of law has become rule by law, the open society has fostered closed minds. There is a Chinese saying, 'On seeing a man of virtue, try to become his equal; on seeing a man without virtue, examine yourself not to have the same defects.' That is open-mindedness. The opposite is true in India: with rare exceptions, when we see someone better than us, we become envious, if not malicious, and when we see someone worse off, we feel smug and snobbish. The Constitution is selectively applied, interpreted and implemented. So are the laws passed by parliament. As the first President of USA once said, "The very idea of the power and right of the people to establish

a government, presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government" (George Washington's Farewell Address, 1796). There has been no 'freedom' from oppression and coercion, and many parts of India are run by a 'parallel state', a coalition of the upper crust, the political class, and the criminal coterie, backed by police connivance.

It is this unholy alliance that lords over the lives of the masses, manipulates the levers of power, gobbles up much of the governmental largesse, and arrogates to itself the status of a 'superior class'. The rest is the ubiquitous 'common man'. If a democracy does not represent and protect the well-being and welfare of the voiceless and the weakest, but caters to a select few, then it is oligarchy by another name. In India, whether it is karmic or causal, even with the best of intentions the most defenceless and susceptive sections end up at the receiving end. This is one of the pitfalls of top-down centralization.

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What Kind of Governance Is Truly 'Democratic'?

The very framework for governance that we have supposedly given to ourselves, the Constitution of India, has proven to be both ill-suited and inadequate. It is abundantly transparent that India needs a radically different form of political and social organization. In its working, our Constitution did not foster unity; it brought to the surface what divides us.

The Athenian historian Thucydides has Pericles, in his funeral oration, aptly simplify the essence of democracy: "It is administered by the many instead of the few; that is why it is called a democracy." What has happened however is the obverse: rule by the few in the name of the majority. The point of reference is to never lose sight of the reality that "power is ever stealing from the many to the few."[16] It is difficult to prevent or resist because the power-deprived are too diffuse and obtuse, too reconciled to their dismal fate. As a consequence, the economic interests of select groups such as the privileged and powerful, large and medium business houses and big farmers, the upper echelons of the salaried class, and the top layer of unionized labor prevail in policy-making and prioritization. While this is almost inescapable in any democracy, it is doubly so in a highly disparate and divergent democracy like modern India. Indeed, the one word that best describes the state of Indian democracy is 'dysfunction'. Nothing is functioning as it should or intended to be, be it parliament or the political system, the executive or the judiciary, bureaucracy, or media.

Indeed, the quintessential question is: What kind of governance can qualify as a democracy in its truest meaning, people power? First of all, is a human being meant to be a 'democrat', the hallmark of which is sharing and caring, and what Beatrice Webb called 'enlargement of human personality'? Rousseau even went so far as to say that 'were there a people of gods, their government would be democratic'. When we often invoke Lincoln's famous dictum 'government of the people, for the people and by the people', we assume that 'people' are good, honest, and honorable. We know that it is not so. In post-Independence

India, despite its deep egalitarian roots and dominated by a religion that preaches inclusivity, acceptance, and accommodation, the spirit of democracy hasn't taken hold or sprouted. We achieved political freedom in 1947, but economic freedom—the capability to acquire the economic means to afford a life of dignity and free from want and worry—is still elusive to huge segments of Indian society.

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India's Emergent Challenges

Introduction

The exhaustive and hopefully insightful appraisal of 'India at 75' on these pages so far leads us to one simple takeaway—that India today confronts a moment of fateful truth, not unlike the *El momento de la verdad* point in a Spanish bullfight, when the matador either makes the kill or gets killed. For India, that translates into a time of high noon or doomsday; a lift-off to a golden age or a gilded age. Either way, India remains a work in progress, an unfinished project that is still being worked upon, albeit unknowingly, by '*We, the people of India*'. What shape it will eventually take will hinge on their realizing their responsibility and will and resolve, the mettle and morale and on the tools they will bring to bear to meet the myriad choices and challenges that lie ahead. Not only that. The outcome will dwarf everything else everywhere that is ongoing in framing world history for the rest of this century. The stakes are that high; the odds are so ominous. This is no hype or hyperbole.

India is a place in which every hyperbole is humdrum, and one can sing a sleepy lullaby or scream in furious frustration. It is a place where every caricature or absurdity

will find a taker. While charting a course for the future, it is important to keep at the top of our mind where India stands globally today. That is because, in an intertwined and intermixed world, aspirations are comparative and realities are relative. What we should remember is that the world is not standing still as India advances; even the poorest country elsewhere is making 'progress' in some way.

India is already the most densely populated and the largest digitally-connected nation in the world. It is home to, if not nominally but practically (based on purchasing power parity) the third-largest economy; it is the world biggest arms importer. What is also true is that it still hovers globally among the countries with the most hungry, impoverished, and malnourished people. They continue to be oppressed by mass disempowerment, outrageous economic asymmetry, and unconscionable structural and social injustice. The bitter truth is that the vast majority of the people in India are denied a healthy and dignified life, which is the highest height of denial of justice. That might remain unchanged even if India becomes the 'world's growth engine', in the words of our current Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Part of the paradox can be attributed to its sheer magnitude and multitude; everything about India, including its achievements and disappointments, is awesome or awful.

The issues that confront us encompass all aspects and facets, but the one that needs utmost attention is fairness and justice, on the political, economic, and social fronts. A clear example is the disproportionate concentration of poverty among India's most disadvantaged—the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and Other Backward Castes

(SCs, SCs, and OBCs)—whose deplorable condition has remained unchanged for decades. This is a clear pointer to how distorted the country's development path has been since independence. It led to a blinkered view of 'development', equating it solely with 'growth' and 'GNP', and a sidelining of what should be, in the words of Amartya Sen,[1] "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy" with a fair and just sharing of the fruits of development. India's 'progress' has left behind an unconscionably large number of its citizens on the wayside, in the margins. There is an unstated but disturbing undertone to this: that such a situation is inescapable when a nation marches on, an unpleasant but necessary price and sacrifice for national greatness. What we should keep in mind is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, being poor is most often not a reflection of the impoverished individual; it is many times a systemic failure of public policy.

We should also highlight another matter of popular misconception. As pointed by a United Nations study, the poor constitute 'untapped potential for consumption, production, innovation, and entrepreneurial activity'.[2] Not only do we ignore this, but that remiss is compounded by the stark reality that the rich harvest the vast majority of high-quality resources, and the uneven distribution of social resources makes it difficult for the poor to enter the rich class by their own efforts. The gradual consolidation of the social class has made the gap between the rich and the poor more obvious from generation to generation. Moreover, working people consume more out of their incomes than the rich; a widening of income inequality that amounts to a shift of income away from the poor to the rich has the effect of reducing consumption and hence aggregate demand,

which in turn reduces investment and growth. Redressing this situation is an imperative that must be uppermost in its nation-building strategy, if India wants to be not just a booming economy that leaves many millions behind, but a caring society that treats all its citizens with equal respect and dignity, and takes special care of its less fortunate. No amount of top-down anti-poverty schemes would suffice; what it calls for is a radical shift in the locus and focus of all policy and decision-making, and a shift in the balance of power. We need to clearly understand the underlying causes and factors that led to this situation to see what we need to do, or not do, in the future.

We just didn't call right when it came to critical choices, beginning with the Constitution and picking the first head of state after India's Independence. We have developed a tendency to shirk straight roads and to go for short-cuts and spurious realities. We tend to create new instituted systems of redefined roles to avoid closing old ones. We have been dithering and dawdling, meandering and improvising all these years, seeking safety through somnolence, somehow surviving from crisis to crisis, afraid even to find the source of it all. We were not able to find it because it is *within*. India is being let down by Indians. Mother India is being suckled to death by her own children. It is not new; it has been going on for a very long time. They are the ones who are endangering it most by the very way they live on Indian soil, oblivious, even contemptuous of its heritage. "Any other country would boast from the rooftops of its great cultural imprint across half the ancient world's population of those times. In India we hear nary a whisper."[3]

The very things that this 'sacred geography' for so long symbolized are all being obliterated to make room

for vapid uniformity, and inane homogeneity, political centricity and hedonistic prosperity, and global aspirations. Ours was the land of dharma, spirituality, and the holistic way of life, an incubator of four great world religions. Ours was the soil that sprouted Sanskrit, the 'language of the gods'. Above all, ours was a laboratory of polycentricism, prismatic plurality, and ethno-linguistic multiplicity. Our ambivalent, even apologetic attitude towards our past is a regrettable giveaway signature. Perhaps our hesitancy to acquire an honest perspective about our past is mired in the fear that somehow it might throw up inconvenient inferences and alerts, which might compel us to deviate from the primrose but perilous course we are on. Our preferred way of preempting such a contingency is to shut it all out; to banish it from the realm of possibility itself.

The consequence is palpably crippling. For, "the most effective way to destroy a people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history."[4] Without that bedrock, our own history becomes what T.S. Eliot called 'a stony rubbish' or 'a heap of broken images'.[5] The agony is even more painful for a hallowed land on which generations and billions of sentient beings lived, loved, and labored longer than in most other earthly places, and left behind such a lustrous and lasting legacy. Indeed, no life lives and dies without any trace; living organisms on the planet constantly interact with their surrounding inorganic environment to form a synergetic and self-regulating systemic, what Hindu scriptures called the *panchabhutas* or five elements of nature. As the most evolved species (at least so we self-believe), the *Homo sapiens* make and leave the largest imprint. The longer they exist and greater their numbers, the stronger and longer-lasting is their signature.

And over time, that large lump of earth assumes a 'living idea' with a collective consciousness.

Such a thought was integral to the ancient Indian reverential view of the cosmos. The Atharva Veda refers to the earth as '*go*' (cow) which provides milk to her calves in the form of life substance. Like much else about classical Indian thought, this would have remained confined and obscure but for James Lovelock (1972) who resurrected it through the theory of *Gaia*, named after the mythical Greek goddess who personifies the earth. It postulates that the earth is a complex living entity, with the sustenance of life dependent on the self-regulating interactions among organisms and their inorganic surroundings. Within that ambit, specific and identifiable parts, populated by humans for eons, acquire, as in the case of the Indian subcontinent, what we might call 'territorial selfhood', a personhood and personality of its own.

Another contributory factor for the Indian subcontinent was its isolating geography which gave the scope for the evolution, spread, and preservation of cultural idiosyncrasies not possible in the rest of Eurasia. Humans have been living longer and more numerously in the Indian subcontinent than in most other parts of our planet. Indian civilization has sustained itself over thousands of years because it venerated its soil as sacred and inviolable. It has also been said that, "India's soil has consciousness. It has a life-form that has prevented the downfall of civilization."[6]

That sense of bonding with this living-land, then known as *Bharatakhanda* (or *Bharatavarsha* or *Bharatakshetra*) held good regardless of whoever happened to control, dominate, and exercise political and administrative authority over its different parts from time to time. Over

eons, this land acquired a life and loftiness that rubbed off on its children.

From birth to death, hundreds of generations of its inhabitants lived, nurtured a sense of 'cooperative individualism', and exhibited an almost eerie ability to be collectively eclectic, assorted, and diverse, without compromising differently shared beliefs, values and way of life specific to a particular place or ethnic group. In short, to be two people at the same time. For most of our history, every inhabitant saw himself or herself simultaneously as born in and belonging to this land, and also as subjects of several sovereigns. That was how there was both continuity and stability in the lives of the people. Phrased differently, India was then a binary of a strong society (*samaj*) and a loose state (*sarkar*). As Rabindranath Tagore detailed, "There was no end to warfare between kings; but in the clearings of our bamboo groves and in the shade of our mango orchards, temples and rest-houses were built, tanks excavated; the village schoolmaster taught his simple arithmetic; readings from the scriptures never ceased, the *Ramayana* was chanted in altar-sheds, and village meeting-places echoed to the melody of hymns to Krishna. Our rural society never depended on external help, nor was its richness of structure ever impaired by aggression from outside."[7]

While looking ahead and trying to construct a new political paradigm, we must bear in mind one salient point: for much of its history, India's political plurality did not come in the way of cultural coherence and civilizational survival. Put differently, political uniformity and evenness was never found to be a *sine que non* for social synergism and people-to-people spiritual symphony. At the very hour

of our 'tryst with destiny,' those of us on whom fell the job of bringing into being a new phase of the continuum of past, present, and future, lost sight of this pivotal message. The British never attempted to bring the entire subcontinent under one uniform rule; they allowed almost 40% of the land to be under princely rule. But the 'new helmsmen' firmly believed that plurality was undesirable, and that uniform rule would be a perfect panacea for the new nation. The severity of that misjudgment is becoming more and more apparent today, as India struggles to juggle with its manifold problems, pressures, and priorities.

Only through a sense of moral urgency and spiritual courage can we really get out of the mindset that shackles us down. For to harmonize and integrate them and arrive at the right trade-offs calls for the skills of a trapezist and a ropewalker, maybe, even that of a magician. First, we must come out of the smog of smugness, resignation, despair, narcissism, and nihilism. This whole debate about the state of Indian democracy is only an attention-grabber; in truth, it is a false trail, a smoke screen. The real question is this: has the institutional framework we chose to practice democracy in, yielded the expected consequence?

India is *more* of a 'democracy', not less, than any other country, but what is important is *quality*; what it means to the lives of its people The cascading concern is not only due to the convulsive complexity of what India confronts, but also because it is yet to find its full voice after such a long stretch of alien domination, which was not only political but civilizational too. The soul of India is still in shackles, and our consciousness is still in colonial captivity. As Ashis Nandy once noted, "This colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies, and it releases forces within

the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all."[8]

What is striking is that while many have studiously detailed what colonial control has done to India, few, if any, have gone into any depth to examine what made that possible, and who facilitated it and why. Perhaps by the time the British came to India, the one who 'broke into our house' was not regarded as a burglar but as a traveler. That was probably why we really didn't mind the British Raj. In that sense, none of us then saw ourselves as 'victims', we were cohorts. This sentiment was well expressed by a Chinese scholar Zhang Taiyan: "By the time the Mughals unified the land the Indian people had already pledged their allegiance to a different people. To be owned by the Mughals and then to be owned by the British what difference did it make to them."[9] On the contrary, we saw, in the words of Ashis Nandy, "salvation in becoming more like the British, in friendship or in enmity."[10]

However unpalatable it might be, the ugly truth is that, barring incidents of resistance by various parts of India leading up to the rebellion of 1857, the colonial rule of India was never so distasteful to make people rise up in revulsion and mass revolt in every corner of the country. That is, until Gandhi came and stirred the pot. Perhaps the fine line that Gandhi drew between being anti-British Raj and, in his own words, his 'love of the British like my own people' contributed to that. There is no record of any English civilian being ambushed in the British Raj. That is India's strength and weakness, exploited by outsiders. That farce, that travesty still continues; we beat our breasts about the menace of the 'colonial mindset', but we still see no reason not to continue with colonial governing infrastructure,

despite mounting evidence that it is responsible for India still struggling to get its act together.

In the attempt to distil and get the best from both, we have ended up with worst of both. Our rulers bring to bear the same 'line of thought' in their vision of the citizen vis-a-vis the state. They believe that the ordinary citizen is ignorant and needs to be enlightened and 'civilized', that he or she is too messy and unruly to know his or her own good. The connecting thread is protection and patronage, not participation. This is apparent in their policy-making, though not in their pronouncements. At the same time, the 'ruled' still fear the state and look up to it with parental '*maa-baap*' respect, while the state distrusts its own citizens and treats them like mendicants. In effect, what happened post-1947 was in many ways a continuation of colonialism by other means and names.

From the Gandhian perspective, it means that we have not yet achieved *poorna swaraj*. For Gandhi, *swaraj* meant "freedom from the influence of western civilization, the western system of value, machinery and above all foreign type of political institutions apart from freedom from political control."[11] The brutal truth is that we have not even seriously begun the process of 'decolonization'. The word is so often used that it is useful to restate its full import here: "In political discourse to social sciences and literature to philosophy we failed to contextualize our traditions and intellectual legacies."[12] As Walter Rodney pointed out (in the context of Africa), colonialism 'created impenetrable structural blockades to economic, and thus also, political and social progress'.[13] The primal reason is that it has made us demean our own cultural background and self-worth. As a result, the colonial mindset remains,

along with acceptance of the 'universality of all western etymologies', deeply embedded and all-encompassing in our 'mind space'. After centuries of being under that yoke, we feel so much at *peace* with it, that throwing it away seems like the height of stupidity, even suicidal. Decolonization, therefore, is far from simple or easy. It is proving more stubborn in India than in South Africa, or in European cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen.[14] What is clear is that we cannot 'decolonize' our mind unless we get rid of our fixation with western benchmarks. To cleanse and purify such a 'septic space' calls for a process of 'social detox', which will not only rid it of toxins but also help it withdraw from its poisonous psychoactive condition with multiple manifests. Without that, India will always struggle to fulfill its full potentiality, let alone possibility. This is the somber setting for the challenges India must face up to.

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Rethinking the Role of the Indian State

The basic structure of the Indian state itself has remained essentially colonial even after Independence. Our Constitution borrowed heavily from the 1935 British-era Government of India Act. The parliamentary system of governance, the first-past-the post system of elections, the idea of All-India Services, were all colonial models. Although greatly modified, and in spite of recent steps to shed the vestiges of our colonial past (many mostly symbolic), they continue in spirit to shape our democracy. Our disenchantment with

democracy is the disillusionment with these institutions and arrangements. At the same time, the role of the Indian state in citizens' lives too became morphed and compromised, and at once too powerful and paralyzed. The first, when power is overly politicized; the second, when resisting the enticement to go for short-cuts and soft choices. On the one hand, its conduct raises the question, *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (who will watch the watchmen?). People have lost trust in the ability of the 'watchman' to do his job. Domestically, the duties, tasks, assignments, expectations, and responsibilities of the state have also evolved, severely testing its power, responsiveness, and capability. The focus has shifted to development work; at the same time, its traditional, even basic, functions have got sidelined. The administrative set-up of the state cannot solely be that of a welfare agency; even development work requires a stable and conducive context. The state cannot sideline its punitive role also; it must ensure that food, water, and drugs are not adulterated while making sure that its own delivery of such services is of high quality. That is what a citizen is entitled to, and that is what characterizes a 'developed country', not the measure of its GDP. We are not able to ensure a 'developed country' image even in our national capital. In India, even the adulterants themselves are adulterated and governments seem either privy or powerless.

With the development dimension dominating as it should in a representative form of democracy, governance is having to cope with what has come to be known as 'politicization' or 'political interference'. While our elected representatives were mainly involved in law-making earlier, they are now getting operationally involved in matters that were hitherto left to officials. That inevitably makes

purely fact-based, impartial and objective administration more complex. Administrators are groping for a way to do what is right, while giving space for political advocacy. It is a tightrope walk, balancing 'professionalism' with 'practical politics'. This will only increase in the future, and we need to arrive at an appropriate manner and method of operational decision-making, both at the macro and micro levels. The situation on the ground has brought the politicians closer to the nuts and bolts of administration, and enabled them to bring the people's voice to the attention of administrators; on the other hand, the administration is being subjected to intense political pressure to deviate from the rule of law. Today, the state stands increasingly compromised, enfeebled, indeed decimated, in terms of its capacities to do what it is expected: protect the weak, deter and punish anti-social elements; give a sense of safety and stability to the law-abiding citizen. The paradox is that while the classical role of the state to ensure peace, order, and stability in society got sidelined, it has not lessened the traditional regulatory burden on the citizen. For example, the number of permits, permissions, clearances, etc., that citizens need to obtain are so many, that even the most conscientious of citizens can never be certain if they are on the right side of the law.

While planning for the future, it is also important to set the record straight on another issue. It is now an article of faith in India that the country is over-manned, teeming with millions of stuffy paper-pushers and corrupt leeches. It is true, but not wholly. In its size and strength, Indian bureaucracy is relatively modest as compared to those in other major countries. In relation to G20 countries, India has "The smallest number of civil servants per capita. The public

sector share in total employment in India (at 5.77%) is half the corresponding figures for Indonesia and China, and just about a third of that in the UK… and pales in comparison to… the USA."[15] Then again, "While India's population increased from 846 million to 1.2 billion between 1991 and 2011, total public sector employment actually decreased from 19.1 million to 17.9 million. Over this period, the absolute size of the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS) dropped by 10%; by 2010, the total strength of the IAS and the Indian Police Service (IPS) was less than 11,000 while the vacancy rate stood at 28%."[16] The question is not *how* huge it is—it isn't—but *why* its delivery and dispensation is so poor, bureaucratized, and hierarchical. Is it structural, or part of the malaise of mediocrity, or both?

What is noteworthy is that the same 'mediocracy' is so astonishingly excellent in rising to occasions like conducting general elections and meeting emergencies like floods. The question is: what clicks then and falters later? Why is the Indian state unable to do what our arch rival, China, could: despite its authoritarian and autocratic political system, it has turned its bureaucracy into a meritocracy. One possible factor is that at crisis time, a driven cluster of individuals and officers do an extraordinary job and then fall back into the normal mode. That would not happen if institutions are strong and solid. What has happened is that we continued with the colonial-era institutions which have failed to change with changing times. We still haven't figured out how to ensure that public institutions are run professionally, while at the same time being accountable to the people. Also, while some of our institutions are of a high class, the standard falls rapidly when it comes to the middle rung.

Street activism. Another symptom of weakening of the Indian state is the rise of the aggrieved or otherwise induced or motivated people taking to the streets—what we might call street 'activism'. A phenomenon as old as civilization, street power has toppled empires and republics. People can wield tremendous power when they actively participate in their own government. Rulers, regardless of the nature of the regime, fear the populists of the streets. It can be viewed both as a healthy assertion of popular will, or as a way to de-legitimize an elected government, a sign that democracy is not working, or working too efficiently. It can be classified in B.R. Ambedkar's fabled phrase, as the 'grammar of anarchy' or as the opportunistic outpouring of our darker impulses. Whichever way, it signifies that the state has simply not been able to keep up with the galloping speed of economic, political, and social change. This has opened up a chasm between what citizens expect of the state and what the state is able to fulfill.

At a very basic level, the relationship between citizens and the state is in danger of breaking down in this spiral of mutual challenge. The law and enforcement machinery is increasingly being shown as hesitant to effectively check violence or defiance of law without resort to needed force. As a consequence, it has become brutal, reckless, and reluctant in doing its duty. The irony is that the state which, according to Max Weber 'maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence', is increasingly unsure when to exercise that 'monopoly', leaving it to the militant citizen to choose his place and time to challenge that monopoly. More and more people have come to think that taking to the street is the only effective way to make a public statement or grab national attention or hog a headline. What muddies

the waters and stirs the pot is India's bane and *bête noire*—politics compromising objectivity. Today, the government is feared by some, the poor; and taken for granted and ridiculed by the rich. All these are disturbing developments that should, in any functional democracy, summon serious reflection. One more factor in this context, is what we might call 'student activism'. Students represent the best of idealism and youth power, and when they feel obligated to agitate over social issues no government can take it lightly. Although they too are getting politicized, which carries the risk of their becoming violent and reactionary, one must consider assertive student power in the public sphere as healthy and positive. The way forward is three-fold: (1) the state should not use its power to contain and crush student power; (2) political parties should refrain from infiltrating and waylaying such power; and (3) the state should formulate schemes to encourage students to get involved in nation-building work in rural India, especially during vacation time.

Privatization. Yet another disturbing development, relevant to redefining the role of the state in India, is the growing tendency of the state to abdicate its essential duty and responsibilities, in the way of assuring the basic safety and well-being of its citizens, and making available all that is needed for day-to-day human life, what are considered essential services. This tendency can be seen in the handing over of enterprises or assets, which are legally government-owned, to private managements that already control their own business enterprises. This has been one of the defining features of the economic policy of the Indian state that clearly distinguish the post-1991 regime from the one adopted immediately after the country's

independence. The current drift is to 'privatize' services, by selling or leasing them to private agencies. It is being seen as a double-advantage: shirk responsibility and preempt being blamed for any shortfalls, while making the much-needed money, which is tantamount to 'borrowing and spending the same amount'. What it adds up to is that we are surrendering long-term good of good governance for short-term expediency… another classic case of 'escapism'. Mass-scale privatization will add to the centralization of wealth and power in the hands of a few by dispossessing the public and private entities of their wealth or land, a process that David Harvey described as 'accumulation by dispossession'.[17] This kind of irresponsible privatization by the political executive could so demoralize and paralyze the civil administration that when a mortal crisis comes up or massive governmental mobilization is called for, public administration will fail, with catastrophic consequences.

Indicative of how insidious this line of thought has become, there is talk of privatizing some police functions as well as the operation and management of prisons. If this happens, it will formalize the police–politician–criminal nexus in India, and usher in a '*mafia raj*'. Although one might be tempted to think that it is purely an executive misstep, some like the Peoples' Commission on Public Sector and Services (PCPSS) say it is "an affront to the Indian Constitution."[18] The right way to look at 'privatization' is to put it in proper perspective. It is consistent with the growing implicit public acceptance that bigger the unregulated presence of the corporate sector in the public space, the better it is, and the push towards political plutocracy. Both need to be vigorously contested for the greater good of the people.

Civil society. Among the non-state actors in a democracy, this is one of the most necessary and important sectors, defined as 'the sum total of all individual and collective initiatives for common public good', or simply, 'non-profit institutions'. These organizations can play multiple roles—watchdog, advisor, organizer, mobilizer, or mediator. They can empower community members with knowledge of the law, their rights and responsibilities, and ensure that the government acts in the service of the people, and that it hears their problems, and makes real changes.

Civil society is both the bridge and buffer between the citizen and the state. It also performs an ardent advocacy role for those who lack the needed resources and organization. It can also keep a government on its toes, and ensure that the government is responsible and responsive, even if not representational. It incubates advocacy groups and offers alternative approaches to social problems and priorities. Although large in size and covering a wide swathe, inclusive of the disadvantaged and disempowered sections, civil society remains almost anemic in much of India, unable to provide the kind of inputs into the working of the polity normally counted upon in a well-oiled democracy. India's civil society is also subjected to a complex legal and regulatory framework, which does little to facilitate or simplify compliance.

Besides, not only the powers-that-be but also the public do not accord civil society the trust and respect it needs to do its job. The executive wing of the government in India never warmed up to civil society, even more so under the present dispensation. There is also some suspicion that foreign agencies are funding civil society organizations and encouraging them to indulge in anti-national activities,

part of the reason being lack of 'total' transparency and accountability in their functioning. Cutting across all this is the overarching reality that this sector, and the citizens too who manage the organizations, come from the same 'stock' like others, and cannot be expected to be 'exceptional exceptions', unaffected by the ills of the society at large. At any rate, India's sickly civil society is one of the prime reasons that makes the state so brazen in its show of raw power. It is such odds that contribute to making citizens, particularly the ones without political backing, so meek and naked before a petty bureaucrat or a policeman, while, at the same time, leading to addictive dependency on the helping hand of the state. When that hand becomes heavy and oppressive, as it does ever so often in India, robust civil society organizations can checkmate it. Collectively creating such a movement must be a high priority for a better India.

In much of today's entrepreneurial world, where the mantra is 'greed is good', there are many who think that government is the *problem*, not the solution. They think that the Marxian concept of the 'withering away of the state' will happen in the opposite way: instead of following the triumph of socialism, it will happen through technological utopia. And that, in the world of the future, private companies like Apple and Alphabet will be the dominant players, and the state will become at best a facilitator and a catalyst. There are others who say that in such a world, the awesome empowerment of the human persona, whichever way it might crystallize, will make something like a state all the more important.

De-bureaucratization, privatization, and outsourcing cannot fill the bill or do the trick. The fact of the matter

is that however much it embraces enlightened concepts like 'B-the-change', the private sector is essentially profit-driven and that drastically curtails its scope and twists its priorities. The strong role of the state is important to developing societies, even more in the case of India. The executive arm of the state and public bodies are so disoriented and enfeebled now that it is 'passing the buck' to do its elemental duty to provide essential services and law- enforcement, even to the judiciary. The preference is to play safe and escape criticism, rather than risk the consequences. The argument is that it will generate new funds and save public money for development work. All this goes to show how debilitated and demoralized and enfeebled the state has become.

The drift is clear: the less you do and decide, the less you can be criticized for, and the more you can savor the perks of power. If the state gets further and 'plays safe', and chooses the easy path of exercising its lawful authority, and if its supporting structures are allowed to implode, so will its hopes and dreams. The time has come to do serious thinking on the respective roles of state and non-state actors, and once such a delineation takes place, the state must be equipped with the corresponding powers, resources, and authority and respect. All this means that India's most formidable challenge is not an external enemy, formidable as it might be. The 'enemy within' is our very inability to put in place a strong state, kept in check by a strong society that is underpinned by a strong civil society. To begin with, the government must stop looking at civil society as an inconvenient adversary, and civil society should not look upon the executive's superintendence as interference. People too, including those who need their

help, and those who themselves can help, financially or otherwise, must lend their unstinted support.

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Realigning Dharma, Spirituality, and Morality

If there is one word that defines the Indic civilization more than anything else it is *dharma*, which the theosophist Annie Besant said was the 'word of India to the world'. It is a common concept with multiple meanings within Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and even Islam, according to some scholars. The connecting thread is that they all inform how human life should be lived on earth in order to be in harmony with the natural order and its laws. The saddest thing about post-Independence India is the disintegration of that common concept, and the snapping of that connecting thread, resulting in dharmic decay and moral decline. A principal cause is the disarray and decomposition of organized religions and their traditional role as a stabilizing and ethically restraining force in society. Indira Gandhi's constitutional emergency amendment in inserting 'secularism' (essentially a Christian concept from the Middle Ages) in the Preamble to the Indian Constitution has made things more complicated. The word was deliberately left out by our founders including her father, perhaps the only 'sincere secularist'. This has resulted in the majority faith of the country (which in the past had always been accommodating and inclusive) becoming aggressive. As one report put it, "It is an irony that minorities are facing more

significant threats and fear of existence in a secular republic than they ever did in Hindu kingdoms."[19] The sad thing is that most religions are, for the most part, followed in their breach rather than observance in their quintessential essence, which brings to mind Gandhi's quip, 'I would be a Christian but for Christians', something that applies even more to his own faith. While earlier the main goal of religion was to reach or dissolve into divinity, it is now to enlist help in navigating through life, and acquire divine omnipotence and immortality. The disenchantment and debasing of religion and its cynical politicization is a major cause of social strife, and society's steep and steady moral and spiritual fall. This is all the more sad because India for long was known as the land of spirituality, and as the place that sought to, in the words of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, 'govern life in the luster of spiritual truth'. Spirituality has become mostly pseudo-spiritual, and that 'luster' has dimmed into darkness.

The emergent task ahead is to arrest this destructive drift, and integrate the essence of dharma, spirituality, and morality with personal and cultural life. That is going to be a tough call. What we must remember is that, even during the more dharmic times before, dharmic practice was more an exception than the rule. We can get a peek into this all-weather human frailty in the lamentation of the great *rishi* Veda Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata*. It is considered to be the very epitome and quintessence of dharma and is inscribed towards the very end of the great epic. Having told a gripping and riveting story, Vyasa sheds the garb of the author and becomes a preacher who beseeches his reader: "On bended knees I beg: when you can get whatever you want in life, wealth, pleasure, fame, fortune—through

dharma or moral agency—why do you follow the adharmic or immoral, route?" The reader, in this context, is really all of humanity. Put differently, when our pursuit of pleasure, power, and desire-fulfillment in this life, and liberation from life itself, can be gained by dharmic or righteous means, why do we choose the path of *adharma* or the wicked way? In other words, when being and doing good is good enough to get all that we seek as a 'good-life' and good-after-life, why do we needlessly and self-destructively do bad? When being bad is 'too much of a burden to bear', to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., why we do love doing bad and hate doing good? The compulsion of modern life encourages unethical short-cuts, making it hard to refuse what we know is wrong, and makes it really, truly hard to do what we know is right. We as a people must acquire a moral spine, to be able to, as King said, 'take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular' but because 'it is right'.

According to the Hindu concept of *kala* (eternal or cyclical time), the current epoch, *Kali Yuga*, is doomed to be the most adharmic or evil of all times, during which egoistic human bearing and behavior, without exception, will be at its highest ebb. Before our time, a rule or a tradition was deemed to be in tune with dharma only if it kept the 'way of the jungle' out of society. This was *Matsya nyaya*, or the law of the big fish devouring the small fish (which, it was foretold, would prevail in the Kali Yuga). The sage Chanakya used this analogy to stress the need for a king or state to prevent this from happening, or at least, mitigate it. What we have today is the reverse: the strong walk all over the weak, the mighty feed on the meek, and the state, which was expected to use a *danda* (stick) to protect the weak, has become the 'patron' of the 'big fish'.

What makes this problem knotty is the real possibility of what is called 'technological singularity'—the machine catching up with or overtaking human intelligence—and man mutating into *Homo Deus*, Man-God.[20] If the human becomes 'God-like', does not making his life dharmic or moral become redundant? This leads to a tantalizing question, the ultimate dharmic riddle: Is dharma itself passé? Is it also on its way towards its 'dharmic singularity' as a part of the still unknowable artificial global society? Can today's 'adharma' become the next norm or the new normal?

Another source of evil in modern society is the growing divergence between public morality and personal morality; we condone or even become privy to despicable acts we abhor in our private life. As this becomes more acute and toxic, so will the chasm between noble ends and evil means. The future version of the human will find himself damned to do what he loathes now. The answer is that even if man becomes 'god-like' in his powers of destruction, in radically extending his life-span, and in enhancing his bodily strength, limb by limb, his consciousness will not change. And, unless his consciousness changes, his conduct will not change. What is becoming clear is this: whatever becomes of the human, robot or cyborg or something unknowable, that 'man-machine' will be incalculably more powerful, and his/its behavior, choices and decisions are logically likely to be purely utilitarian and opportunistic, circumstantial and consequential. All the more, the choices and decisions will be a *sine qua non* to strengthen, not weaken, his ability to differentiate good and evil, right and wrong—to do the right thing. Let us not forget that even without attaining such a 'god-like' or celestial status, man

is now an agent of change of geological scope, capable of blurring the distinction between human history and natural history. Simply put, the way the human is organized and functions as a social being must give way to a new *modus operandi*, which puts a premium on collective good ahead of personal gain.

The problem is that we are too preoccupied by the result and the fruit of what we do, and not by the question whether our deed or action itself is right or wrong. People judge everything from the perspective of personal profit or loss, and not for its morality. A good example is corruption. The bribe-taker wants to make a fast buck, no matter how. The bribe-giver wants to get his job done, no matter how. The politician bribes the voter to win the election, no matter how; the voter takes it, no matter how… At the heart of our society there is a moral emptiness and spiritual numbness that does not even allow us to be aware of such a condition. It shows up our inability to be humane in the face of inhumanity, banality, brutality, and barbarity. Our stance towards society is seismically skewed; we expect it to cater to our needs and wants, but offer only scorn in return, bringing to mind what Aristotle once said: "He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must either be a beast or a god." In India, it is neither 'inability' or 'lack of need' but self-centeredness. To forestall such a disposition, we must instill moral sense at the earliest stage in life. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* laid great emphasis on the moral grounding of children. He held that "Instilling ethical values in a child kept him ethical later in life. The grounding in ethics, such as the capacity to follow one's conscience, look beyond self-interest and show benevolence towards others, was as

important as learning professional skills."[21] One reason why moral decay has been so devastating is that it has come with the rise of money as the all-consuming obsession. By all accounts and surveys, India ranks very high among the 'most materialistic countries' in the world. To be true, the pursuit of wealth, was always recognized as a legitimate aspiration; it was one of the four *purusharthas*. But it was tempered by the injunction that it has to be by dharmic, moral means. That linkage has snapped in modern India. And that requires strengthening of our 'innate Buddha nature' that seeks to well up within us.

Although we tend to think that morality is personal and private—'between me and my God'—the fact is that "the consequences of discarding a sacred moral code to govern the actions of individuals are far graver than most people realize."[22] We also apply 'differential moral imperatives' among different sections of society. Instead, we should try to make the moral imperative, what the philosopher Kant called 'categorical imperative'—unconditional moral obligation which is binding in all circumstances and is not dependent on a person's inclination or purpose. Moral accountability and societal standards now vary as per who represents the cause and the culprit: the rich and powerful are different from the others even in terms of morality. We deliberately ignore the fact that to get rich quick, people undermine every other value. Anything that affects them grabs our fascination and attention, and even if they are the villains, they go scot-free or get away with a slap on the wrist. Such moral 'double-standards' are everywhere, but nowhere as jejune and audacious as in India. We instrumentalize the legitimacy we claim to dominate animals, and extend it to the poor and powerless, we claim

that prerogative as our legitimate right. At its core is the implosion of intrinsic integrity and withering away of the will to distinguish between righteousness and wickedness, and of the distaste for disorder and hesitation to hurt. For will is the measure of morality and it is, in the words of the Flemish mystic John van Ruysbroeck 'the measure of our holiness'. Our will is now ill will, the cause of all our ills, almost an instinctive inability to rejoice in other's joy.

We must be clear both about the ambit and the nature of that the elements that we need to imbibe. Dharma embraces every type of *sadachara* or righteous conduct and *dama* or sensual-restraint, covering every aspect of life, both religious and secular, that is essential for the sustenance and welfare of the individual, society, and creation. Dharma, it is worth noting, does not prescribe passivity or abstinence or acquiescence with injustice nor does it prescribe absolute nonviolence. It is not an apology for poverty. It implies that there is nothing wrong in aspiring to be rich, famous, and powerful, in fulfilling all worldly desires and trying to attain other-worldly benefits, provided righteous instrumentalities are adopted and provided that the actions cause no injury or injustice to anyone else. In India most people become rich and powerful through immoral means. This brings to mind a Sanskrit phrase that is all too often only partially quoted as *Ahimsa paramo dharma*, that is, "nonviolence is the ultimate dharma." However, what is frequently omitted is the second part of the phrase, which is particularly relevant to the Indian context: *Dharma himsa tathaiva cha*, which translates as "so too is violence in service of dharma." This does not in any way dilute compassion and empathy. The same act of violence can be good or bad, subject to circumstance. But when we lose the instinctive ability to

differentiate between dharma and adharma, between good and evil, we cannot determine when to summon violence and how, and for what. Simply and starkly phrased, we cannot fix what ails India today, and we cannot do what needs to be done, either constitutionally or even if we magically find leaders who are worthy of our belief and whom we can believe in. That is because our Constitution is at heart 'un-Indian', as we have seen earlier, devoid of any endogenous merit or native jurisprudence, and devoid also, of the spiritual *sangam* that was the construct of ancient Indian society.

Any shift to a truly 'Indian' Constitution is the equivalent of a *de facto* Indian renaissance, and has to be anchored in spiritualism, which in the case of India, was built on the bedrock of dharma. This was underlined by spiritual masters like Sri Aurobindo. He said, "All great movements of life in India have begun with the new spiritual thought and usually a new religious activity." To quote Jawaharlal Nehru: "It is significant to note that the great political mass movements in India have had a spiritual background." The advent of science-based technology has not in any way diminished or diluted it. Indeed, it has become even more important and imperative. Because, sans any spiritual back-up, stand-alone scientific/technological singularity, which pundits say will soon be upon us, could be an invitation to a secular apocalypse. To offset that contingency, we need to seamlessly sew together the 'scientific' and the 'spiritual'. India ought to be the laboratory for that because ancient India was both a spiritual powerhouse and an economic superpower. Although it was not 'scientific' as the phrase is used currently, our distant ancestors and forefathers made seminal contributions within a wide swathe of subjects from

mathematics and metaphysics to architecture, engineering, astronomy, metallurgy, medicine and surgery. For example, the Kailash temple at Ellora by itself showcases the 'wonder that was India'. The question therefore is: why, how, and when did we fall to the present low?

The world needs a deeper understanding of dharma as it was prevalent in ancient India, but that has to be both reprised and revised. This is the equivalent of revising and updating the *Dharmashastras*, a stupendous task for which we need men like rishi Veda Vyasa. A good beginning would be to reconnect modern Indian society with its now-adrift spiritual and moral moorings, and revive dharmic values such as 'absence of conceit, absence of hypocrisy, speaking the truth, harmlessness, accommodation, straightforwardness, and compassion for all beings'. It almost means modernizing morality, turning 'being good' into the 'big thing' whose time has come, the spiritual thirst-quencher for the wayward millennials and the restive Generation Z.

Most people nowadays, tend to think that 'being good' may be good at times, but not if 'being bad' pays better, and if 'being caring' means asking for trouble. The practical problem is that there is now a chasm between 'feeling' good and 'being' good, between good-desire, and decision-making. Many want to do good only when it does not cause any kind of personal loss. Many feel good, but do not know how to operationalize it. Some others do good sometimes, but do bad at other times, and do not feel bad. What unites them all is that they all want a 'good life' and 'happiness'. So many of us sit on the fence when we encounter oppression and injustice. As Desmond Tutu said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the

oppressor." Most are caught in this quandary, and without an internal moral compass, they just drift from event to event and embrace destructive radicalism, or choose a seemingly safer way, or embrace another religion or faith. How does one reconcile conflicting responsibilities, obligations and duties and rights, each of equal moral legitimacy keeping in mind the good of humanity? In dharmic language, these questions are called *dharma-sankats*, or moral dilemmas. It ought to result in bringing to the center stage of social consciousness principles like empathy, equity, and justice.

As India is the birthplace of dharma, where the very soil is steeped in dharma, which has formed the very soul of its shastras and the heartbeat of its heritage, putting dharma back at the focal point of its society ought to be the country's chosen duty. Simply extolling it and calling Indian civilization dharmic, and bewailing the doom of that civilization is another evidence of our 'exceptional' escapism. The way to the 'operationalization' of dharma is to make it the stuff of everydayness, not just the stuff of heroic or moral giants, and do small good things that can bring even the smallest blessing or source of relief to others. It means that whatever we do, or have to do, we must try to do it differently, we must do it morally; and see to it that, because of it, no one suffers needlessly. We need to inject the dharmic dimension into involuntary choice-culling; make the moral mode the default mode, the invisible hand that tilts the scales. Dharmic life was never meant to be a grim, austere life. Life was viewed as a celebration, a joyful party, and the presents we bring to it are ethical conduct, goodwill to all, and injury to none—*manasa*, *vacha*, *karmana*, in thought, speech or deed. The capacity for empathy, the quality of fairness, and the willingness to see the welfare

of others as one's own are important components of such ethical conduct. In short, we must flaunt our dharmic identity in that rosy spirit, and like ripped jeans, make it a rebellious statement. We must be able to pay earnest heed to the dictum 'the more you take the less you have', as Master Oogway says in *Kung Fu Panda*. We must realize and recognize that true selfishness, in the sense of what kind of behavior benefits us in the long haul, is *selflessness*, which alone will let us sideline narrow self-interest. This allows us to resist the allure of profit-making and power-grabbing in everything we do. This is the way to make dharma a habit and the way to make it gain self-momentum. India ought to be the crucible for universalizing and contemporizing of dharma as a principle, that can change the course of human destiny. This will be an experiment that could be a beacon and a balm to a world that has become despondent enough to willfully usher in a future that will slowly make us redundant or self-destructive.

In trying to make dharma topically pertinent, it is important to underscore that dharma is integral not only to Hinduism but also to Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Even Islam has a similar concept called '*din*' (in Arabic). The task of codifying and making dharma relevant to modern man must be undertaken as a major inter-faith initiative rooted in India. The added reason for India a laboratory is that India, in its composite construct, mirrors the world. If it works here, it can work everywhere.

Eight-fold path for everyday life

Dharma, it bears repetition, is multi-faceted and multidimensional, eternal and elastic, firmly grounded and contextual,

slippery and specific, spiritual and societal, time-specific and duty-bound, personal and positional. How then can we use it as a compass for our everyday contemporary lifestyle? One way is to latch on to that which cross-cuts all dimensions and manifestations of dharma: morality, which is more tangible and easy to grasp. To make it relevant and usable, the moral way must get it impregnated into *dinacharya*, the day-to-day rhythm and play of life, activities performed from waking up till retiring for the day. Exhortations such as cultivating a tranquil mind and compassionate heart by themselves won't do; nor does mere selfless service, as the Dalai Lama suggested. Indeed, the classic, much-quoted adage *dharmo rakshati rakshitaha* ('protect dharma and dharma will protect you') remains a rhetorical statement because we don't even know what being dharmic in practice is, in the current age. Modern man likes everything to be a ready-to-swallow pill, or as a kind of a neat checklist of simple dos-and-don'ts. From that down-to-earth point of view, perhaps the most practical way is to draw on Buddhist philosophy. It is the way of 'operationalizing' the doctrine of dharma. So can a deeper understanding of what the Dalai Lama said give us a few insights?

Hinduism underscores the point that while man can pursue all the pleasures of life, *artha*, *kama*—even *moksha* (final liberation)—they must be '*dharma baddha*'—pursued and achieved righteously. The Buddha's Eight-fold Path—right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration—carries this forward and tells us how to do it while carrying out our daily chores, duties and responsibilities both at the individual and social levels. It fills another critical vacuum. Most of us want to

be good, or at least want to do good, but are at sea when it comes to *how* to practice it or even how not to do bad. This has been the age-old lament, voiced by sages such as Vyasa and St. Paul. Although there is no unanimity, many Hindus cite many sources to claim that the Buddha is one of the ten principal avatars of Vishnu!

Whether or nor that is true, adopting his eight-fold path as a practical tool for human betterment is the right step forward. It can serve as an example of inter-faith mutuality, which is today's crying need. It tells the direction of what one should try to do while doing what one cannot but do daily to live. That is the beauty of it. It says that anyway you do all that; now just do it differently and morally. Those precepts can inform, influence, and inspire the way we show up for our day-to-day living. As a people who claim the Buddha as one of our own, and want to capitalize on that, India should make a collective effort to put this into practice. These precepts should guide our words, choices, and actions through the various scenarios and situations that we encounter in life.

At the same time, it is indeed necessary to rethink some of the elements of the eight-fold path to highlight those which have been made more marginal, and to reconsider how this path could best be configured for our time and our world today. The three that need special attention are: right thought, livelihood, and speech. First, everything begins with thought. The *Dhammapada* puts it this way: 'With our minds, we make the world'. With man hell-bent on the many-fold enhancements of human thought power through 'thinking machines', this becomes all the more life-changing, even life-saving. Virtuous thought also helps in 'saving' us from cravings and compulsive consumerism.

Second, at a time when a vocation or making a living, and being successful by any means in the market place has become the main purpose of life, and the mouth has become a lethal weapon in political and public life, we need to emphatically emphasize right livelihood and right speech. We must constantly bear in mind that all vocations and occupations are not morally the same, that how we make a living should not cause suffering or harm to others. In other words, not only should we do work righteously but also assiduously refrain from being harmful to society and posterity. Three, what we have in India is a 'double-jeopardy': on the one hand, 'much is said than done', and on the other side, what is said is often more harmful than what is done.

What has come to be called 'hate speech' is increasingly becoming a part of the daily dialect and gaining constant currency, and right speech has become more consequential. Speaking ill of someone has become almost reflexive. What we say must not be at the very least intentionally hurtful to someone else or be socially disruptive. We should pay heed to what Shantideva, in his classic work, *The Way of the Bodhisattva* enjoined: When the urge arises in your mind to feelings of desire or angry hate, do not act! Be silent, do not speak![23]

Treading this 'path' could help solve the one crisis that underlies every other crisis that plagues India—the moral crisis—and make India's 'word to the world' meaningful and operational.

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Managing Mediocrity

Once known as the land of abundance, eminence, and excellence, India has, over a few centuries, lost that sheen and splendor, luster and luminosity. This is the malaise of modern India. A mindset of mediocrity, of ordinariness, averageness, and an ambience of listlessness and under-achievement has found a secure home in our psyche. We have no clue at all how and why we ended up at such a nadir. All said, mediocrity has become the national emblem and signature. It is the other 'pollutant' we breathe, which cannot be contained by any mask or pretense. Whatever alibis and excuses we might offer, the brutal truth and bitter reality is that India is, and has been for some time, in the thrall of mediocrity. Worse, it is metastasizing, spreading all over.

Mediocrity is not only poor performance; it also shows up as lack of basic integrity. That is not because we don't know what integrity entails, but to embed that in action is hard work. Many consider it is okay to work harder and aim higher, but not if 'less and lower' gets us everything society can offer. It has twisted our moral compass, and is also making us intellectually and culturally adulterous. It seems unbelievable that we have nearly 1.4 billion people in one country and hardly anybody is avant-garde. We should at least be the world leader in one or two areas, but we aren't. Even our creativity is mediocre. We are not good original product creators; we make good CEOs, not good founders. We are all at peace with it. That's why, 'we will continue to disappoint both optimists and pessimists at the same time'.

This is contrary to the exhortations of our own classical wisdom. For example, Chanakya (Arthashastra) enjoined us: "Never settle for anything less than what we deserve; it is not pride, it is self-respect." It is disturbing to note that we almost instinctively believe that what we achieve—average or below par—is what we deserve, that being half-good is good enough. India's consistent underperformance is mainly a modern-day phenomenon. It was a society whose performance stood above that of its contemporaries, in the classical times. Indeed, the anomaly or even absurdity is that our 'promise' is so enormous and bottomless, that current India, even if it becomes what it seeks to become, can still not attain its full potential. What is blocking the path is none other than who we have become as a people, and as human beings.

What ails India, above all, is *moral impairment* and *mental mediocrity*. These are across-the-board and all embracing. It is mediocrity that helps maintain the status quo. It is mediocrity that is stalling any move towards total change and comprehensive reform, making it impossible to trigger any 'chain of transforming events'. Mediocrity is accepted and respected by a majority of people who are mediocre themselves. Most settle so easily for mediocrity, be it in relationships, lifestyle, health, thoughts, or habits. When people have nothing against which to measure their achievements except the so-so, run-of-the-mine achievements of others, how can anyone be blamed? There is something soothing about mediocrity. It is consistent, non-demanding, and requires so little effort. Mediocrity is easy to digest and in sync with low expectations. It creates such a smog that we have become incapable of reconciling 'the truth we wish for with the one we get'. If our envy and

fury is mediocre, our wants are mediocre, if we value safety above all, if those who are supposed to spearhead social transformation can easily be bought over, how can there be any revolution?

Social injustice is usually a contributory cause in many societies, but in India, despite mass and massive injustice, the affected sections turn their ire against each other. India is so huge that even if it sprouts and ripens somewhere it will be easily contained by aggregate and crushed by the apparatchiks of the state apparatus. If our envy and fury are mediocre, our competitor is mediocre, our wants are mediocre. If we value safety above all, if those who are supposed to spearhead social transformation can easily be bought over or browbeaten, how can there be any revolution? With 'revolution' ruled out, we are left with the two destabilizing forces of debilitative norms and values and middling mental state. What is worse is that it has now become part of our culture, perhaps even our civilization. As a result, moral transgressors and reprobates are socially applauded, and making any extra effort or pursuit of excellence has become both redundant and devoid of any advantage.

Cutting corners every way and making easy money through any means have become part of the national 'new normal'. Money minus moral restraint, atomistic pleasure-seeking and unbridled sensory-gratification are priority goals for millions of people. *Sab paise kaa sawaal hai* ('everything is a matter of money'), the common refrain everywhere, sanitizes every moral mischief. Our role models are charlatans and entertainers, not men of letters or apostles of morals. In daily life, it is almost impossible to, as it were, separate chaff from grain, the fake and

fraud, from the authentic and legitimate. Robbed of the right people to emulate and living with 'grown-ups' whose conduct inspires no respect, and witnessing how society reveres rascals, the youth of the country become both existentially and emotionally adrift. What should have been an exhilarating time has become a time of trepidation and foreboding, which is not conducive to create a generative culture.

One can also ask: if I am happy with what I am, why should I do anything different just to be 'not-mediocre'? And if tolerance, acceptance, and surrender are extolled as virtues scripturally, why shouldn't one apply it to material things too? There is no net and right answer. But the question itself is tantamount to being in the spell of '*chalta hai*'. Many may feel no pangs of pain of denial, but they feel no joy in what they do for a living, and do entertain a nagging feeling that they are not living up to their full potential as a social species. That is what separates us from other animals, after all, at least so to speak. We must recognize and realize that such a sapping 'state', that insidious situation, could well be the biggest brake, a herculean hurdle and a compulsive obstruction to whatever, as a people and community, we want to do to be better. Directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly, that is at the root of much of what has gone adrift and awry in India, the principal cause and reason for India's across-the-board falling behind the curve, and the inability to measure up to our own hopes. Whatever ambitions, goals and targets and aims we might entertain, those could meet the same fate, without frontally facing this issue. And there is no quick fix or short-cut, or magic wand or Vedic mantra to get over this. The Catch-22 here is that to get out of the present morass, we need above-

mediocre effort, but we can't do that because we are mired deep in mediocrity.

There are two options before us: the easier one, in tune with our plight, is to just give up and fall back on Micawber-like optimism; the other, to summon any semblance of spine that still survives in some of us and, so to speak, start from scratch and see what we, as a people, are still capable of. What goes in favor of the latter course is that we only need a critical mass of compatible citizens, which by any law of probability, we should have in India. However, such is the spell of this situation that we like to get deceived by the narrative of numbers, such as 'India is the fifth biggest and fastest-growing major economy in the world', or as 'so many millions have been lifted out of extreme poverty, and so many rural toilets have been built'. These achievements and similar others are by no means insignificant, and credit must go to where it belongs, to the ruling regime. One does not have to be pro-somebody or anti-someone to acknowledge that. But that should not obscure the larger picture.

First, these are huge numbers because we are big in numbers, and also, many comparable countries are ahead in most related respects. By any reckoning of competitive global excellence, we rank among the lowest, and we are not even a shadow of what our relative size and acumen deserves. It is shocking but true that in the last hundred years, there have been only five Indian Nobel laureates. C.V. Raman is the only Indian to have been awarded the Nobel Prize for work he did in India, and that was in 1930. In literature, it was Rabindranath Tagore in 1913. Indians are professionally highly competitive the world over, literally in all fields, but do poorly within their own country. Once

known as the center of educational excellence with world-renowned universities like Nalanda and Taxila, we don't even rank now among the top 100 premier universities in the world. Indian books or journalistic essays do not make news around the world, and public punditry remains tethered to the Anglo-American ecosystem. To top it all, even in the much-talked-about services sector, particularly the celebrated IT industry, which contributes 9% of our GDP, we are mediocre. The service-based model focuses only on profit-making and easy money, whereas the product-based model focuses on cutting-edge technology and consumer hardware. India has no company in the Digital Top 36 (whereas China, Japan, and Korea have 12), and only two Indian companies figure in the Digital Top 100 (China, Japan, and Korea have 30). Presently, some steps are being initiated to mend this dismal distinction—a desire to turn India, in Prime Minister Modi's phrase, from 'chip taker to a chip maker', and trying to go on to making parts of the chip value-chain—but they are still baby steps.

Yet we shouldn't get lost in the woods. It is quite simply conscious avoidance of the facts, intentionally shutting one's eyes to an obviously irksome situation, the knowledge that we could have had but chose not to have. The big question is this: Is all of the above simply contextualization of coincidences, or is there more to it than meets the eye? Surely, it is the second. Although, admittedly, there could be other valid factors at play, one connecting thread—all the way from cricket to movies to Olympic medals, Nobel winning, NRI excellence, mimetic intellectuals—is the drought for any drive for excellence. To be the very best in what we do, and not be too happy to settle for second-best, should stem from the soul of India.

Unfortunately, in modern-day India, systems are built to accept and tolerate just passable quality. There is no premium on high-performance and possible perfection. Social norms of recognition and rewards are swayed by factors outside the quality of work involved, like power and patronage. Moral cowardice incubates and invites the culture of mediocrity. It has turned into a ship that is carrying "1.2 billion people and it's directly heading towards not an iceberg—but into a cold, desolate and endless ocean which makes sucks souls out of people, leaving them to die out of mediocrity and boredom."[24] It is a trap, a cage, and a swamp we are stuck in. It is both a condition and a contagion. People who have a sub-par life obstruct those close to them from going beyond and above, and the reason for it is simple: losers like company. It is everywhere and in everyone; it is there as pollution is in the air, in the contaminated water we drink, and the adulterated food we all eat. It is in us and outside; it is absent nowhere. It is embedded in the national psyche and in the mainstream of our cognitive process and analytical thinking. Not knowing or having anything else, we brawl and scramble for the crumbs of mediocrity, see each other as what is coming in the way of getting 'some more' of the same and for that, willing, as it were and so to speak, to lose an eye if the other fellow loses both eyes. That is why we have become a morally fraught and fragile society. No one is complaining; because we don't know *how* to know that we *don't* know. In India, the brilliants mostly pass away into oblivion. It is mainly actors and cricketers who are raised to the podium of the gods.

To find out where the probable answers lie, let us first see what the tell-tale signs are. We are mediocre when we

don't give our best and we don't mind. It just doesn't bother us; it is doing just what is necessary and not more than we must; to fear stepping out of the cocoon of our comfort zone. It is to plow through the day doing what needs to be done but without much interest and with no intention of going above and beyond. It is to settle on something that isn't the best it could be. We must be careful not to slip into 'moral mediocrity'—aiming to be only about as good as our peers—not being especially better, nor deliberately worse. That only devaluates and depreciates our collective ethical behavior. Mediocrity therefore is not only a matter of efficiency and productivity, and underperformance and under-achievement, but even more about not measuring up to being humanely human. Unlike other fellow-animals, we have the free will to be moral, and *not* trying to be that is mediocrity.

The next step is to keep this constantly in mind as a benchmark, and apply it every time we do anything of any importance anywhere. Conscious awareness is always half the battle won. We don't know when and how this 'monkey of mediocrity' got us on our back. It brings to mind the classical archetype of the 'Old Man of the Sea' carried by Sinbad the Sailor (*Arabian Nights*), which symbolizes all of those things in life that trick us into carrying them for just a little while, making us feel good about doing it at first. Once past the initial stage, these things tighten their grip on us and become a burden, forcibly driving us to carry them to places that merely make us miserable and sick, and eventually exhaust and enfeeble us. That was possibly what happened to us sometime in our checkered history. Initially, we might have felt the pinch a bit, but slowly we got comfortable and soon we couldn't live without it. The

sooner we get this baggage of mediocrity off our already crippled back, the better it will be for ourselves. But how? In the case of Sinbad, he finally rids himself of the nuisance by getting the Old Man so drunk that he falls off. In our case, we are not even conscious of the 'old man', alias the 'monkey'. We assume that that is how any human's back is. With no resistance from us, the 'monkey' is so slyly ensconced that we don't even realize that such a burden is on our back.

We don't know how far back, but certainly those born during the British Raj and early post-independence were affected by the 'mediocrity infection'. It is because *their* parents, their teachers, their role models, their acquaintances, and virtually every other responsible adult they knew, had unwittingly settled for less. They were at peace with themselves because they knew nothing else. What we, as citizens of this country, must do, to get over this mediocrity, is to take a pause, step aside, and become observers of any consequential action we are doing, and ask ourselves: Is there anything we could do, but that we are not doing, to get a better outcome? It is different from what we call, 'out-of-the-box' thinking. We have to go beyond 'thinking' itself. Because our very thought process is conditioned by mediocrity. The mindset is more than the mind, and the mind is more than the brain.

To break out of the logjam, we need to introspect on what we as a society can and should do. Particularly in a modern society, every individual, and even his/her very cognitive consciousness, is circumscribed and seasoned by the context in which he/she lives and works, and by social norms, assumptions, and expectations. No man is an island by himself… more than ever so in today's world.

The problem with India is that that 'context' is a transplant from an exogenous soil. While any transplant or graft can serve a purpose, it can never fill-in for the original. Moreover, a 'transplanted context' hampers every effort and effect of any individual. The same action done in the 'source-soil' of the transplant can yield a more wholesome result. This may partially explain why the same 'Indian mind' is hailed as brilliant and so much more innovative when it functions outside India. In other words, today's India faces a 'double-whammy'. The Indian 'seed' is good, but the Indian 'soil' is contaminated. When it is in a kind of reverse transplantation, when the plant is taken from the source of the original contamination, it will flower and yield a bumper harvest. The result is that we are losing the 'best of the seed' born and raised here, while the 'other soil', without the trouble of planting and nurturing the plant, is getting to reap the yield.

The way out of the quandary is to de-contaminate our soil. India must start by not adding more contamination, which is to pause what we have been doing for the past 75 years. We have to change course and get on to an altogether different path, policy, and preferences and priorities. At the same time, what we must *not* do is to go to the other extreme, that is, intensify the rat-race and turn ourselves into a political 'meritocracy', which is what, some say, is what China is today. It has been said that the "Chinese government, in principle, is run by well?educated and experienced officials who were carefully selected and promoted by merit. This meritocracy can guarantee policy integration to pursue comprehensive social development and pandemic control."[25] The takeaway point is that "If there's one principle on which the vast majority of

Chinese people agree, it is meritocracy… Chinese people's faith in meritocracy is rooted in both our culture and our institutions."[26] Meritocracy—often cited as the 'golden ticket to growth'—might give people the motivation to pursue their goals and faith in their ability to climb the social ladder, but the downside is that it could actually reproduce and exacerbate social inequity. It might be feasible in a totalitarian and homogenous society like China, but not in a democratic and diverse nation like India, where it could lead to social implosion. We have to overcome mediocrity without slipping into meritocracy. It is also worth mentioning here that although China might be meritocratic, its culture has always been that of a collectivity; people instinctively live together as a team and community; almost as multiple arms of a single human. They are faceless and anonymous and do not crave for personal accolades as we do. Perhaps that is why excessive state control doesn't bother them that much. In other words, China found a way to harmonize its culture with its ruthlessly competitive stance.

India has not done well in that direction. We virtually sacrificed our own culture and traditions and adopted the Western way. That is not natural to us; therefore, we are not good at it. We fell between the two stools and settled for the crumbs. We are neither winning individual fame and awards, nor have we made the country a beacon of light and prosperity. We became mediocre and lost track of our own way to excellence as a society. We have to find a *modus vivendi* that is faithful to our own heritage, culture, and ethos, and drawn from the very diversity that was a cementing force in ancient India. While India is now a politically unified society, ancient India was a politically plural society, composed of multiple kingdoms

and republics. How was India a land of excellence then, and why is it now a land of mediocrity? That is a complex question, for which there is no simple or single answer. But one of them possibly was that regardless of who the *rajah* or ruler was, people at the functional level (the level at which people actually live, work and comingle) enjoyed a lot of administrative autonomy, and were largely in charge of their lives, and the means of earning their livelihoods. Not only that, their culture then was far less individualistic than it is now, which put a premium on honesty, hard work, and complementarity. The work they did to 'keep their body and soul together' was interdependent and was carried out with zest and zeal, not as a boring chore or solely to make money, as of now.

Consequently, we have to alter our social stand and values, recognition, and rewards. Most of all we have to pin our hopes on the millennials and Generation Z to get the country out of the mediocrity trap. Thanks to globalization and internet search engines, they are not confined to a smug and self-satisfying culture, and they are potentially capable of attaining the highest standards. But that potential will get snuffed out if everything else is stacked against it. A handful might still aim for the sky but the country can remain in this morass. To get the mainstream out, what goes by the ubiquitous word 'system' must offer a contributory ambience and conducive landscape for unfettered entrepreneurship, out-of-the-ordinary ideas, and risk-taking. Stumbling should not mean sudden death; nor should failure lead to a life of unemployment. This is also a propitious time as "a powerful and interesting juncture of consumption and creation economies."[27]

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China: Dealing With the Dragon

The dragon next door

Ordinarily, and even rationally, any agenda for India's renaissance should focus on domestic issues of crucial import, and the issue of general foreign policy becomes peripheral. However, in the case of India at this present point, our relations with China in particular—because of its sheer gravity and strength—make it a compelling crash project of utmost urgency. That is not only because China is a mortal threat, but also because it calls upon us to make a domestic 'sacrifice'. It puts the 'security state' at odds with the 'development state'. In the past decade, economics and national security have collided. Now, it will be more stark and consequential. We cannot change geography. China is our immediate and most important neighbor, and it has grown exponentially in the last thirty years right under our nose, while India has lagged behind equally 'exponentially'. The contrast should never have been so sharp, but this is one of free India's greatest failures. China's real inherent intentions about India are misty, but indications do not give us assurance. First, it did not want a united India; it would have loved what the British did not mind: the break-up of India into several states. That desire seems to have become only stronger in recent times.

From Mao Zedong's time to Xi Jinping now, one unwavering 'article of faith' for China has been to do everything possible to thwart India's rise on the world stage. In China's estimation, the USA is past its prime, sure to collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions and gridlock. The 1962 India–China border clash was a major

faux pas of Nehruvian 'forward policy'. With the benefit of hindsight, it is fair to conclude that that 'war' could have been avoided had India been more accommodating. Let us not forget that around that time, India was a 'rising star' on the global scene, and China was a 'pariah' nation. In that sense, China had more to lose than India. Although this war, as modern wars go, was not high in terms of casualties (1,383 killed, and 1,047 wounded), it dealt a body blow to India's self-respect and global image, from which the latter is still smarting. Since then, all Indian Prime Ministers felt it was safer to put it on the back burner, which carried no political cost.

First, India should be fully cognizant of the ground realities. Even without a crystal ball to gaze through, China will continue to be ruled by the Communist Party of China (CPC) for the immediate future. Although its membership (an imposing 9.5 crore) is just 6.5% of its population, it dominates every organ of state power in China, including the government, the legislature, the judiciary, and the armed forces, and reaches into virtually every corner of public life. What is remarkable is that, despite the huge benefits of joining it, so many have chosen to stay away. It means it is not for ever, and at some distant point in time, the realities might metamorphose. Yet, it would be a colossal folly to think that there will be an internal 'regime change' in Beijing any time soon, and on that expectation, to ostracize China. The principal reason is that the material quality of the lives of ordinary Chinese has vastly improved under this regime, far more than in India since Independence. Analysts tell us that an average Chinese is five times more better-off than his Indian counterpart. The 'freedoms' we think we have in India, and which the Chinese don't have, are

no counterweight. Some observers even say that "China's government today is ironically more popular than India. The irony is that even if the Chinese government is more 'popular' and 'successful', it still does not feel 'secure' and 'shielded' enough. What it all means is that there is little likelihood of any 'regime change' from outside the CPC in the immediate future. That doesn't rule out the emergence of another Deng version at some unpredictable moment and the consequent radical changes. There is another critical factor. The West, particularly the USA, realizes that a full-scale Cold War with China might imply a huge hit on its economy and people's prosperity and that would be a nightmare for anyone even to entertain. That was never the case in the previous Cold War, with the then Soviet Union. The two economies were not so intertwined. Faced with such a stark choice, Western democracies could well prefer to accept a more mean and muscular China in the world, so long as China does not seek to extend its 'sphere of influence' to Europe and North America. We must realistically recognize these realities and realpolitik in weighing our options. While accepting in full measure that an inimical China next door could be something India must factor in for the long term, it must, at the same time, do everything possible to put an end to the festering border dispute with China. Roughly at the time of the 1962 war, both countries were more or less on par; indeed, India's GDP in 1960 was higher than that of China. Things have turned around now. To talk of a race is ludicrous. China is miles ahead in every measurable way.

Some analysts predict that another 1962-style humiliation will be even more devastating for India, given the vast and growing difference in new military high-tech

capabilities between India and China. They say that the next war, if it happens, could be over in ten days, with Chinese occupation of Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh. Whether or not it will follow such a dismal script, there is little doubt that China is single-mindedly preparing for technological and economic domination of the world, and India is in its crosshairs. The only way to counter this is to, on the one hand, do our utmost to come to a kind of 'live-and-let-live' kind of detente with China by settling the boundary dispute, by blaming it as a colonial legacy on the lines of an East–West swap. On the other hand, India must strengthen itself and prepare for an emerging Himalayan high-tech warfare. No country can conquer another country, much less a country the size of India; hostilities would end sometime, but the question is on whose terms. And no country can also save another, most certainly not India. External help, if any, would be more symbolic than substantial.

Most of all, we should avoid slipping into such a situation where we are cornered and left with no option except to retaliate out of pique or pride, or due to a snowball syndrome. In short, we should avoid a repeat of 1962. Avtar Singh Bhasin's book *Nehru, Tibet and China* (2021) documents well the slippery path in painful detail. Contrary to popular optics, India was by no stretch lily-white; just the contrary, *we* were the provocateur. As Bhasin says, "The position taken by India in the past was not a rational one… and China was not altogether perfidious as it was made out to be." Many tragic historical events occurred this way. Should such a situation arise, China certainly has more resilience than India to absorb any damage. And China might fancy that a limited but decisive war with India would take it a step closer towards what

Xi Jinping called the 'Chinese Dream'. It can demonstrate to the rest of Asia, particularly in the Pacific, what defying China could translate into.

However, this does not mean that India has to turn tail or show the white flag. China also knows that it cannot wish away India or conquer or subjugate a country of India's size and significance. Granted that China's foreign policy may not be so susceptible to domestic exigencies like in a democracy, it cannot still be wholly impervious to domestic pressures and world opinion. The Communist Party of China and the generals of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) are not like the ruling party and the military in other countries. They are parallel power centers. It means that if China realizes that India is not an easy pushover, and if it is satisfied that India is not ganging up with its only rival in the world, USA, in an undeclared 'Cold War', then it might settle for a compromise. For India, there is bound to be some tight-rope walking. It has to be both strong and flexible; China should not be forced to consider that a swift war with India is a 'necessity' for the furtherance of its global agenda.

The unavoidable homework for India

The bottom line is that the prerequisite to deal with the dragon is not only muscle or money, but morale too. What China will assess carefully is how united, determined, and steadfast we are as a nation and as a multicultural polity. India is seemingly so chaotic it could mislead a casual observer. It could give the impression that it is a country ripe for revolution or dissolution. China watches what is happening in India, both with a telescope and a

microscope. Compared to that, we know so little about China, partly because China is a 'closed society' and partly because it requires greater attention and resources than others. We should not depend only on the overstretched and hierarchical foreign service establishment. We have to essentially fight our own battles. We cannot, on one hand, say that we have earned our right to have our own say on global issues and, at the same time, expect to be bailed out when we are in a pickle. Our insistence to keep India out of formal military alliance works both ways. We cannot be a junior 'partner' to anyone; but it also leaves us alone when the crunch time comes.

The 'package deal' put forth by China in 1962 could still provide a basis and a point of departure. In tricky and disputed boundary issues, one should be pragmatic and flexible. Any breakthrough can only happen at the highest political level, not through endless meetings of 'special representatives' or diplomatic nimbleness. One hypothesis is that "They [China] are not after territory, their target is our national will, morale and the sense of autonomy we feel in making our strategic choices. They are attacking India and the Modi government at their weakest point. Our broken politics."[28]

Broken politics in a messy and maddening democracy like India is equal to fractious polity, and that will drain and debilitate a nation so much that it cannot mount any concerted effort on any front, let alone countering an implacable adversary. If there is one area that calls for prime ministerial leadership, this is it. But it is conspicuous by its absence, which reveals short-sightedness. The right leadership at this juncture could result in a huge dividend, with even global spinoffs.

Everyone—politicians, academics, opinion-makers, media—must bear in mind is a passage from the New Testament: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand."[29] That indeed is the single most manifest message from Indian history, and yet we resolutely refuse to heed it. Certainly, not something we can ignore while facing the mortal threat from the united and single-minded Chinese. In India, there is no hesitation to exploit any external crisis to try and give a bad name to the party in power and goad it to hasty decisions. Even an iconic leader like Nehru in 1962 had succumbed to such a ploy. The added danger is that, never having known what democratic functioning implies and entails, China might even misread the state of raucous disorder in India as signs of breaking apart and provoke a war to seize the 'chance'.

What we have to assimilate mentally is that China is waging a war of attrition and 'strategic strangulation' against India. Bite by bite, it has been nibbling away at India's borderlands, what Shashi Tharoor calls 'salami-slicing'.[30] Some analysts believe that, as things stand, both on the ground and tactically, 'Beijing holds all the cards' and that India faces the danger of 'losing without fighting'.[31] That is not only because India's choices and capability are more circumscribed but also because of our historic weakness: domestic disunity in the face of existential external threat and propensity to shirk hard choices. And China is banking on that as much as on its own strength and staying power.

Chinese geo-political thinking is so Sphinx-like that there is really no way of guessing its true motives, or even to know if India has unknowingly crossed a Chinese red line. That kind of uncertainty makes all policy-making and

strategic analysis a gamble and a leap in the dark. No one—not even perhaps China at this point—can be sure whether or not, and if so why, when and how the situation could escalate into a 'hot war', and the added risk of Pakistan joining, however weak it is, should not be made light of. But this much seems pretty certain: if it happens, it will be a no-holds-barred, high-tech blitzkrieg. The Chinese President Xi Jinping openly exhorted the PLA, to "strengthen military training oriented towards actual combat."[32] Though his sights are set on the USA, we can take it lightly only at our own peril. Doubtless, India is far better prepared now than in 1962, and is actively modernizing its combat capability and its military might, like its economic clout. But, as an analyst in a new book says, "China will overwhelm India (in ten days) using multi-domain operations, imaginative war concepts and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, and combat robots."[33]

Whether that is accurate or overblown, China's military expenditure is approximately four times that of India's, while its economy is five times larger. Its declared aim is to transform the PLA into a 'world class military' by 2049. Its aim to forge military-civil fusion (MCF) is an aggressive national strategy of the Communist Party of China in that direction. China may, at some stage, decide that a military conflict with India would serve a double-purpose. To showcase to the world, particularly to the USA, its new-fangled armed capability, and to deal a death blow to India's drive towards economic eminence. China knows that, for once, time may not be in its favor, and that it must act soon to abort India's growing strength and zeal to be a major global player. One more thing we must be crystal clear about: China may come to a kind of detente

and entente with the USA sooner than with India. Rivalry with the USA is for long-term global strategic dominance. With India, it is an immediate matter, potentially with direct domestic consequences, an impediment to China taking its 'rightful place' as the dominant Asian power. Rapprochement with the USA it could live with, if it gets its pound of flesh that it thinks is its due; but with India, it might see it as more problematic and nearer home.

Some may say that it was India which provoked the 1962 war, and but for that, relations with China would have been different. It may well be so, but provoking a fresh border clash with India again and prolonging it does not gel with that. Whatever and whichever, India must be prepared for the worst-case scenario. What we must keep constantly in mind is that the secret of Chinese power is *money* power—it is the world's largest official creditor; it has given direct loans and trade credits to more than 150 countries[34]—and it thinks the world is now its oyster. It is using indebtedness as a tool to turn countries into client states. With regard to Western countries, it is buying what we may call 'strategic silence', even in the face of domestic interference and espionage. Not to speak of violation of human rights, something about which China is strident in castigating other countries. Let us recall what the Greek historian Thucydides reminded us more than two millenniums ago: "War is a matter not so much of arms as of money" (*History of the Peloponnesian War*). In the same vein, some analysts in the USA are warning that 'if Washington wants peace in Asia, it must prepare for financial war with China'. What is ironic is that China's 'money-might' was fathered and fueled by the USA itself, again as a means to make more money for itself!

India's options

In the context of such a scenario, India's realistic alternatives are far fewer; we are in no position to precipitate any kind of war with China, be it political, military, or economic. Unlike India, it doesn't have to worry about politics at home. The regime rallies around the will or whim of the ruler. We are not yet in a position to make China pay prohibitively for any deterrent effect. Maybe it will take another five or so years if we sustain and speed up the present momentum, diplomacy, and defense, and, above all, if we do not implode internally! First and foremost, we must drastically cut down on our trade deficit with China. It was about $90 billion in 2023. China believes that time is on its side, and that, as a civilization, it has more sustaining ability than the West. But with regard to India, it can't be too sure. The paradox is that India is civilizationally secure but as a polity it is fractured. To offset China's aggressive posture, India must build closer strategic relations with countries like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. It has to become strong as a society, not merely as a nation. At the same time, we must also understand that what India is up against is not only an expansionist China but also a revanchist China. Unlike India, which cares little about its past hurts and humiliations (even if we do, it is to belittle ourselves), China seethes with resentment and revenge.

China has old scores to settle with India, about which most of us are unaware. What most of us do not know was that for over a hundred years (1839 to 1940) Indian soldiers, albeit under British command, were stationed in China as virtually an occupying force. The first real armed encounter between Indian and Chinese troops took place on Chinese soil in the town of Dinghai on Chusan Island

(now Zhoushan) in July 1840. Some Indian maharajas (e.g., of Bikaner and Gwalior) joined the fray, obviously to curry favor with the British. China holds us responsible for converting 25% of their people into opium addicts. After British colonization, India was regarded as 'a teacher by negative example, a failed and fallen country which had been subjugated and enslaved virtually without resistance from its people.'[35]

In short, Chinese perception of Indians has been that of a weak, soft, and spineless people After it became a free and independent nation, China viewed India as 'an artificial British creation' which was bound to collapse due to its own contradictions. Chinese media, obviously officially controlled, openly says that China should actively support secessionist forces in India. There are reports of Chinese funding of some political parties through their Indian subsidiaries. China scoffs at India's claims to be competitive with it, but, at the same time, it is very wary and worried. It cannot be passive for too long about the rise of India relative to China. At some point, it might have to decide to nip it in the bud.

The Chinese have a long historical memory and some even fear that India will once again serve as a platform for a Western assault on China and that needs to be neutralized well in time. They also think that we cannot be trusted because we are by nature (and not by calculation) given to petty intrigues and trickery.[36] Sometimes an enemy can have a clearer vision than the adversary, even if the motive is evil. The coalesced outcome of all this simmering ill will and insults, and misreading and miscalculation, could germinate into a spiral of fear and uncertainty leading, almost unstoppably, to conflict. Such a seemingly doomed

chain of events leading to a kind of double whammy is timeless and axiomatic. As Thucydides put it: "The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable."[37] We can well substitute Athens for India and Sparta for China.

Whether or not such a somber scenario is accurate or inflated, the sheer possibility of a multi-pronged confrontation with China must not be taken off the national high table. In matters like this, there is no margin for error. Here again we should heed Thucydides' wise words: "When people are entering upon a war, they do things the wrong way round. Action comes first, and it is only when they have already suffered that they begin to think." And, "I am more afraid of our own blunders than of the enemy's devices."[38] The time to do the unhurried thinking is now, to pre-empt the blunders of 1962. We have to redouble our efforts to settle the festering border dispute by recognizing the ground realities and not to hoist it as the litmus test of newfound manhood. The very acceptance of the problem as a 'dispute' means there are no settled 'facts' on such a long and meandering border, which means neither side can claim 'my way is the highway'. China may be less willing now than in 1960, because it has become a global power and wants to be a preeminent power by 2049. China might grab it for its own geo-strategic reasons. At the same time, we should get powder ready for a worst-case scenario—a repeat of the 1962 war, this time not so short and swift, but far more destructive, with the added possibility of a second front by Pakistan, in Kashmir or Kutch. We must intensify diplomatic efforts to build alliances with other countries threatened by Chinese aggressive posture to send a strong signal that a 'war' with China can trigger

other complications and compulsions. This an acid test for Indian diplomacy. Domestically, putting together a nationwide, cross-sectoral consensus must now be of the highest national priority. The platform to build has to be even broader than China's MCF—India has a far more diversified infrastructure—and it should not be confined to defense services. It has to be a total, comprehensive and all-hands-on-deck kind of mobilization. The point is that both to prevent and to wage war we must be fully ready to wage the war.

It is also not impossible that in a world in a state of flux and fast change, even if India stays circumspect and scrupulously refrains from what could be viewed as provocative action, China might still initiate some kind of a military maneuver to 'teach a lesson' to India, like its punitive war against Vietnam in 1979. But, hopefully, China itself learnt a lesson by that experience; Vietnam, from all accounts, gave China a bloody nose and China didn't achieve any of its stated goals. What it all boils down to is that India has to do its preemptive preparedness and planning with the certainty that China's moves and motives will remain 'a mystery wrapped in a riddle inside an enigma', to paraphrase Churchill. It translates this way: China can read us while we can't read it. Astonishingly for such a critical country, two great civilizations divided just by a border, we know so little. There is little scholasticism about China compared to what little there is about the USA or Europe. We can't even be sure how to characterize the 'being' that we are so exasperatingly entangled with. Is it a sworn enemy out to cut India out, or an arrogant adversary that sees India as a thorn in its flesh, or are we estranged neighbors caught in a squabble over a common fence that

careened into a bloody clash? China can, as of now, be any of them or even something that is still evolving. It is this volatility and open-endedness to all options that makes any calm and candid consideration of our relations with China so challenging and such an uphill climb. The only responsible way to err on the right side is to pass everything of any import or purport through the 'China filter', or what some choose to call the 'China test'. Practically, it amounts to asking and answering a pregnant question before arriving at any course of action: "Does x or y decision/development/relationship help deal with the China challenge, or not?"[39] The answer does not always have to be to downplay all other touchstones, but that must be in the full know of its China consequence.

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India's Faustian Choice-making

What we must fully comprehend and come to terms with, at this hinge of history, is that we are making seminal and seismic choices without fully digesting their epochal influence and impact on India's future and its people's well-being. The where it's at of good governance, more so in democracy, is 'choice-choosing': to choose rightly among other choices, to choose a proper preference over other preferences, to choose a particular priority over other priorities. That is also the heart of policy-making and strategic thinking. It is extremely complex and complicated in a huge country in a hurry like India, with a bewildering

bevy of pressure points and convulsive compulsions and compelling constraints. Sad but true, post-Independence India hasn't done a good job right from its moment of birth. That is why India is where it is.

India's choice-making has become particularly herculean because the choices already made render any well-reasoned choice now so perilous and prohibitive that it risks unleashing 'unknown-unknown' forces and unforeseeable consequences. These are what we may call Faustian choices, a situation where every choice creates a vicious spiral, where any advantages come at a moral cost. By definition, such choices are self-defeating and tragic and sinful. What is being given away is far more priceless in the long term, as compared to what is being obtained in the short term.

Our wrong 'choice-choosing' began right at our birth as a free nation: we chose the easy way to make our country's Constitution. Instead of doing the hard work of crafting one that is appropriate to India's history, culture, and composition, we chose to base it on something we had denounced earlier, and lifted ideas selectively from others. That choice was classic Faustian, if there is one: defined as 'one made or done for present gain without regard for future cost or consequence'. Even to correct that monumental mistake requires another 'choice'—to boldly acknowledge the error and get down to framing the kind of Constitution that we know our country needs.

Yet another short-sighted choice is that we are bargaining away our environment and social equity for the sake of growth and the good life. The result is that India has seen a steady and steep decline in the quality of all its natural resources ranging from land and forests to water, air and biodiversity. We pollute everything we touch or use;

there is no bias here. Despite small gains here and there, India it is still one of the most polluted and environmentally degraded countries of the world. Similarly, on the social front its record is no better; it is one of the most biased and ethically fractured places on earth. The litany of our *vikarmas*, or wrong choices, also includes our bartering away of moral instinct for materialism, and of spirituality for sensual pleasure.

Sometimes, our Faustian choices give us the false sense of 'feel-good', the appearance of doing something while doing the opposite. One example is the way we choose to pay tribute to our icons and stalwarts like Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar. In place of diligently following what they stood for and exhorted us to do, we choose to instead erect statues in their memory. There must be millions of busts of these two Indian visionaries, even in the remotest of our villages, many of them poorly executed and almost grotesque. A more recent phenomenon, even mockery is 'gigantism': erecting mammoth statues, vying with each other to be called 'the tallest'. These include political role models such as Sardar Patel, and even spiritual and religious luminaries like Adi Shankaracharya and Ramanuja. One fails to understand what is sought to be achieved by this gigantism. Why wouldn't a more modest sized statue do, which makes it easier for people to pay their obeisance? It has now turned into a race: the next statue has to be bigger; otherwise, we are being less respectful of our great guru or hero. If we don't want to take chances, make the statue sky-high, no matter what it costs the country. It is worth pausing to consider how funds could be diverted towards the greater good of the nation. For example, the cost of the 182-meter 'Statue of Unity' of Sardar Patel, which is twice

as tall as New York's Statue of Liberty, "could have funded two new Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) campuses, five Indian Institute of Management (IIM) campuses and six Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) missions to Mars."[40]

We are close to the point of no return. We don't know which choice could end up being the last straw. If we deliberately dither or delay making choices, they will still be made—most certainly choices of the wrong kind, which, in turn, will require more choices, which will inexorably lead us to a Hobson's choice or a Pyrrhic victory. Another choice of a somewhat dubious nature we resort to, when faced with 'too-hot-to-touch' issues like religion and caste, is to choose *not* to choose. We feel that any consequence, however consequential, cannot possibly be as calamitous as the probable fall-out of a conscious collective choice. We clutch at reeds like secular sloganeering and hope to successfully swim across to the shore of inter-faith amity. Our *netas* choose short-term electoral moral seduction by way of freebies and bribes, fanning communal flames at the peril of weakening public morals and fracturing social harmony.

Where we are, it does not have to be that way; we could do things differently if we chose an alternative route to political stability, economic well-being and social equity. It is the willful continuance of the flawed and crooked present—with all its ugliness and, obscenities, divides, and distortions—in fashioning and framing the future, that might, in all probability, turn India partly prosperous but mostly miserable. Put differently, that choosing lies in aiming to be a great power, not a great society; it amounts to going for greatness, not goodness. It lies in choosing

global clout over domestic demands. The question therefore is: should India aim to be a state with an extensive ability to exert influence or project power in much of the world, or should it aim to be a society built around high levels of social trust, justice, and equality, human health, and happiness? What makes it all so sad is that such a choice is unnecessary: with a different Constitution, policies and priorities, power symmetry and a more moral mindset, we can harmonize the two. Unlike any other country, India has so much scope for turning probability to certainty; it can achieve both goals in harmony with each other.

We need to mull over the grim ramifications and repercussions of such Faustian choices. What kind of a state and society would future India become? What kind of people are we to allow all this to happen without doing anything to stop or prevent it, and worse still, to try to profit from such suicidal options? There is now little doubt that in the decades ahead, in spite of all that might happen, the sheer immensity of India will translate into its strength globally, and its leverage will only grow, but that, in all likelihood, might entail substantial domestic sacrifice. It is also likely that even as the economy grows bigger, the intolerable conditions in which millions of our fellow citizens live will only continue, and may become more acute. That will be the consequence of the choice of focusing on the ends of economic growth over the means to achieve it. That being the likely emerging scenario, we must seek other avenues of power projection. The power we must seek to project ought to not be economic, much less military, but cultural, moral, and spiritual. That is India's true trademark and trump card. Instead of making that 'choice' we want to project our material might.

Our almost pathological preference for Faustian choice-making has led to or has taken shape as another national trademark: escapism as a coping mechanism. It is our tendency to seek diversion and distraction, release and relief from unpleasant realities, a way of avoiding an arduous or vapid life. Put otherwise, it is simply our proclivity to stop making any choice; it is to 'ignore real life altogether'. It also swings the other way around: the itch to damn everything around us, which shows up as aggressive behavior, casual cruelty, rebellious violence, addiction to addictions. One such is the feel-good cheap dopamine that social media offers to retreat into virtual worlds. While it is universal, studies show that Indians spend more time on social media than online users in China or USA. Another 'choice' is to choose mediocrity to escape from what is being described as the 'Matrix' India—to break free from the stress and suffering, angst and anger, boredom and burdensomeness, weariness and worries of what living in India demands.

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India's 'Exceptional' Escapism

It would be an understatement to say that India has lived an extraordinary past. It is a civilization that has endured vicissitudes and vagaries, not to mention centuries of occupation and enslavement. So much so that it has left us confused about who we truly are as a people and a community, or even who we want to be. Today, our

peculiar condition has coalesced and condensed into the Indian version of *exceptionalism*. It is a doubtful advantage and a mixed blessing.

Trying to be, and being exceptional is positive, but *behaving* exceptionally is different. Even more so when that behaving is collective and as a nation. It makes one feel 'chosen', not bound by normal norms and moral conventions, and not what the ordinary are expected to abide by. China has for long seen itself as *Zhongguo*—the two-millennium-old 'Middle Kingdom', the center of the universe, the oldest culture and most moral society, a dominant power in the world. It now has an unwavering agenda: regaining that eminence and avenging its past humiliations. As for the USA, it was founded on the pivot of the Latin phrase *E pluribus unum* (out of many, one), and hence has an 'exceptional motion' with a manifest destiny, ordained to lead the world, to thrust its might without guilt.

Indian exceptionalism, on the other hand, is nuanced and mixed-up. It is, on the face of it, a unique country; its geography is exceptional. It has a distinct identity, demarcated by mountains and surrounded by the sea. It is home to one of the greatest civilizations on earth. It has given to the world four great religions, and the doctrine of *dharma*. India was known as the land of spirituality, and its people, more diverse than any other nation in every known way, were characterized as 'intoxicated with God'. All these should have offered India, on becoming free from alien rule, an opportunity rare in human history to make its debut on the global stage in an exceptional way—with a new constitutional creed, a new governing philosophy, and with principles on how such dissimilar sons of such

a hallowed soil, each bound together by silken sinews can organize themselves and live as one family. What is 'exceptional' about Indian exceptionalism is also that many of its parts and constituents are all 'exceptional' in their own ways… ethnically, culturally, and linguistically. Instead of building a new India on such an 'exceptionally exceptional' foundation, we chose to copy the alien stereotype. India was, is, and always will be 'exceptional', but India as a nation in no way reflects it.

India's current locus of exceptionalism is distinguished by two aspects: absence of excellence, and abundance of '*escapism*'. For a country chock-full with so many people, descendants of such gifted ancestors, it is exceptional by its utter paucity of excellence and originality. The way to cope with this is escapism; make everything around an escape from something else. Its 'avatars' are the three Es—evasion, explanation, and excuse. We pass the proverbial buck, offer some reason and finally, when nothing else works, express grudging regret but always shy away from accepting responsibility. Take, for example, our reaction when confronted with criticism about how poor India is faring on many economic and social parameters. In place of initiating an in-depth appraisal, we either question the credentials of the source of the criticism, or the criteria used by it, or dismiss the state of affairs as something natural in a large country like India.

Our escapism takes us back into our distant past too. In lieu of trying to draw the right messages and raising red flags, we either shut it all out, or view our past in utopian or dystopian terms, depending on what suits us at that moment. What is surprising is that for a country with such a long history, most Indians lack a sense of history. That

'sense' is so low that historical sites appear to be visited less for appreciation of their historicity and heritage than for plain recreation. Mausoleums seem to attract more visitors than museums that house artifacts and antiques that showcase ancient Indian civilization. What makes this 'exceptional escapism' a matter of upmost concern is that it is hampering our ability to mobilize and marshal our energies and attention to do all that is needed to overcome our present problems and pave the way to a resurgent India. It gives the cover *not* to take tough calls.

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From Fraternity to Synergy

One unmissable inference that comes to light from a bird's-eye view of India's post-Independence past is its weak capacity to turn institution-building into nation-building capability. And that has been, *inter alia*, hampered by its inveterate incapacity to foster a feeling of mutuality and affinity among its people. Without such a 'feeling', any community will remain a conglomerate, not a confluence, of its members; or, to borrow the phrase from P.G. Wodehouse, 'a musical comedy without music'. For, 'a nation is no aggregate of separable functions, but a harmony of functions…'[41] A nation, in the words of Aristotle, is not an accidental collection of individuals. Nor is it a household enlarged million-fold. That common thread is what has come to be called, in modern times, 'fraternity', which is enshrined in the preamble to our Constitution. Article

51A(e), one of the directive principles of the Constitution, calls upon the state "to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic, and regional or sectional diversities."

But the idea of inserting 'fraternity' into our Constitution was primarily inspired by the 1958 French Constitution. Even in France, it needed a cataclysmic event like the French Revolution to give birth to such a notion, although the concept itself is much older. According to Aristotle, for a *polis* (city) or political association to endure, there must be political fraternity in the polis, as well as justice among its members. It was the French who upgraded its relevance from polis into a republican ideal. But even here, as the nation changed republics and the tides of history marched on, it became the philosophically neglected third child of the French Revolution, remaining an elusive and multifarious ideal to this day. That did not, however, deter the architects of our Constitution from borrowing that word. In fact, it was the personal brainchild of Ambedkar; as someone quipped, 'he pulled it out from his shirt pocket on the morning of 6 February 1948'. Factually, the word 'fraternity', did not figure in any of the numerous preliminary or contemporary documents or debates, not even in Nehru's Objectives Resolution passed on 22 January 1947, or in the M.N. Roy and Gandhian drafts, until that fateful moment.[42] In B.R. Ambedkar's own words, "Fraternity means a sense of common brotherhood of all Indians—of Indians being one people. It is the principle which gives unity and solidarity to social life… Without fraternity, equality and liberty could not become a natural course of things. It would require a constable to enforce them."[43]

With such a soaring certificate from its chief draftsman, who could oppose it? That might have been the mindset of the members of the Constituent Assembly while adopting it, not its appropriateness to the Indian ethos. Ambedkar was clearly inspired by the French Revolution, although he later (1954) ascribed it to Buddhism.[44] There is nothing with it or with the idea of fraternity as a binding feeling to a fellow-citizen. If we strongly feel that an exact individual is potentially unequal or inferior to our interests, how can we have shared fellow-feeling towards him? No one can doubt Ambedkar's motives or giant intellect or his patriotism. The point is that what does it matter how good the vehicle is or how powerful its engine is for a smooth ride if the path is full of thorns, stones and holes? At best we can make it less bumpy. All the blitz and boost we are giving to speed up and telescope our nation's economic emancipation, it is getting bogged down because we have failed to make any headway in cleansing our social landscape of its toxic weeds.

Seventy-five odd years after India's birth as a republic, 'fraternity' is being characterized as the 'missing link of India's democracy', and as the 'most radical and important idea of our times, the necessary foundation to fight all the world's injustices, hate and inequalities'.[45] The question is, is fraternity the 'missing link'? Actually, there is no 'link' at all as of now. That is the problem. Our earlier *link* that stood the test of time for so long, terrestrial and territorial, is snapped. That was transcendental, almost mystical; it was felt in their bones and blood. Bereft of that bond, there is no single sinew that combines and connects India's innate dissimilarity and immense disparity. As we have seen, the political is a poor substitute. What is possible

at best is a faint fraternity within distinct groups, not nation-wide. Indeed, the trend is otherwise: sub-groups are arising within groups, claiming their share of the pie. Even their language or caste is not strong enough to espouse a common cause. Then again, we confuse 'fraternal' with 'fraternity'. The first, as pointed by Angel Puyol,[46] is a feeling and a moral virtue, and the second is a political concept, 'a political community in which the citizens share a bond of equality with each other that compels them to prohibit the subjugation of any member by any other and to mutually help each other in case of need'.[47] In India, we have no such 'prohibition', but facilitation of subjugation. We cannot have fraternity with ill-will at heart and malice in the mind. It is one more example of our penchant for mimicking Western world ideas germane to its culture and context and slighting our own mores and models.

A much deeper and more encompassing home-grown concept is one of the phrases our leaders repeat everywhere. It is the Sanskrit maxim found in Hindu texts such as the Maha Upanishad: '*Ayam bandhurayam neti ganana laghuchetasam udaracharitanam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam*'.[48] It translates as: "Only small men discriminate saying, 'one is a relative; the other is a stranger'. For those who live magnanimously, the entire world constitutes but a family." Almost always, we hear only the last two words of the maxim being recited. The idea of oneness or *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (VK, for short) is also reflected in the Vedic saying '*yatra vishwam bhavati eka needam*', or, 'the world is a nest'.[49] The word 'world' may not exactly correspond with what we now understand it to be; it could be at once as wide as creation or what we call nation now, *Bharatakhanda*. As one commentator explains: "The

philosophy of VK seeks to overcome the 'us-versus-them' mentality, which is at the root of conflict and violence. The leading International Theory, namely, Realism is based on the concept of 'the other'. VK reflects the universal yearning of mankind. The philosophy transcends any specific religion. It emphasizes inclusion. This philosophy is deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche."[50] Without trying to dive deep into its meaning and measure, we have turned it into a hollow cliché, rehashed *ad nauseam* by a bevy of our prime ministers of every hue, from Nehru to Indira to Rajiv to Vajpayee to Modi. The close relationship between fraternity or universal brotherhood with VK was widely recognized (of all the people, by the revolutionary anarchist Bhagat Singh[51]). Our founders felt more at home by opting for the French version. VK should have been inserted in our Constitution as its overarching philosophy; what was desirable globally cannot be unworthy domestically. The bottom line is this: whether it is VK or even fraternity or brotherhood, are all goals to strive towards, even if, in practice, they cannot be adopted in letter on the ground.

What we should really aim at is something less utopian and more realizable—exorcize mutual suspicion, cultivate social civility and cordiality, and move towards synergy. We must work together to create something greater than what we can achieve individually and alone. What is needed is to instill the spirit of cooperation, complementarity, and camaraderie, a feeling for affinity and solidarity, not coalescing or amalgamation. In the main, it means that everyone retains their distinctiveness but ensures that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In short, synergy is augmentation of social capital. It is, as defined by the World Bank, 'not just the sum of the institutions which underpin

a society—it is the glue that holds them together'. Phrased differently, it is the 'connections among individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them'.

Barring rare exceptions, we have been largely unable to manifest that 'spirit' in our civic life. We cannot achieve social solidarity by ignoring what Marion Young called structural injustice, which 'exists when social processes put large groups of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities… a kind of moral wrong distinct from the wrongful action of an individual agent or the repressive policies of a state.'[52] Few societies fit this description more than modern India. It can be ascribed mainly to the fact that neither the political architecture nor the development trajectory adopted have been conducive to and compatible with that objective. Both put a premium on the individual (the sense that one is an end to oneself; no one is another's keeper), and the autonomous effort and energy than nurturing fraternity or synergy. Effectively, individuals are separated from each other, even though connected constitutionally and as citizens of 'one nation'. We have become too self-absorbed and self-indulgent with each other, often at each other's expense, virtually turning us into conflictual competitors. China has been more successful in this regard, owing, in no small measure, to its synergistic roots in Confucianism, which emphasizes respect, honesty, loyalty, hard work, collective effort, and wisdom.

In contrast, the dominant religion of India, Hinduism, which symbolized spiritual synergy, could not permeate that spirit in the social sphere or work culture. It had no problems

with sheltering and synergizing its *shad-darshanas* and different Vedantic philosophies, and every difference from atheism to agnosticism to *Advaita* and *mimamsa* to monism. Each was encouraged to put forth its very distinct view on the nature of reality and divinity and its nexus with man. It had no qualms to call the atheist philosopher Charvaka, who had challenged the Vedas, a *rishi*, a great sage. The point of departure was that they all saw no conflict in the supreme existence of the one, and the apparent existence of the many. Although there were occasional periods and points of friction between their followers, by and large they were viewed, as Swami Vivekananda said, as 'successive stages in spiritual progress'. His guru Ramakrishna Paramahansa simplified it by saying in Bengali, '*Joto mot toto path*'—'as many opinions as many paths'. But the people of India could not manifest a similar spirit or esprit de corps when it came to the zeitgeist of our times.

When it comes to material matters, our differences get magnified and overwhelm any symbiotic endeavor towards a common cause, even if the nation is facing any transnational threat. That was how India was plundered and pillaged so repetitively, and that was why foreign occupation and colonial plunder lasted that long. The British always saw to it that there was no "growth of any dangerous identity of feeling from community of race, religion, caste or local feeling."[53] The British saw the "existence side by side of hostile creeds"[54] as essential to their rule. They were so successful that it soon got ensconced as a common character flaw that haunts us even to this day. Instead of progress towards fraternity or even synergy, what preoccupies us is fights over identities. We must find ways to vanquish this formidable foe. It has to involve a change of mindset

that is able to perceive another citizen, with whom we have to interact with personally or professionally, not as an avoidable irritant or a necessary nuisance, but as one who is worthy of our act of humanitarianism. Without such an attitudinal transformation, our identity-squabbles and ethnic and linguistic animosities will continue to drain, dissipate and divert our efforts towards transforming our collective energies into synergy.

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Leveraging Diversity

On the world stage today, India's real comparative advantage lies in its exceptional diversity and multiplicity. However, its current baseline is dismal: it has failed to optimize this advantage and has allowed itself to become a dissociated and discriminatory society. We treat variety as something that we have to cope with. For us, being different is something to be shy about, something whose influence we must fight and mitigate.

For reasons hard to decipher, most of mankind extols oneness, unanimity, equality and evenness in society—which is the opposite of what exists in nature. Indeed, creation itself is dissimilar, diverse, and unequal; no two are the same or identical, or 'xerox facsimiles'. On the other hand, what nature exudes is balance, equilibrium and harmony, synchronicity and synthesis; there is a certain stable relationship even between predator and prey in the

jungle. This is what the human world should attempt to assimilate. All nations, in different ways and degrees, are contrarily composed, and none more than India. India's coalescence goes so far back, and has been so fluid, that it is impossible to say who were the originals and natives, and who were the 'add-ons' and arrivals. To paraphrase the mystic and visionary Sri Aurobindo's description of divinity, 'India's illimitable unity is the sum of an illimitable variety'. Being many, not one, is India's life blood. It must not try to foster unity through uniformity. What is perplexing is that we reflexively accept other people's different appearance, language, and ethnicity, but not different beliefs and belief-systems. To treat it like a millstone or a malaise is suicidal. So will it be to nullify plurality in favor of a straightjacketed 'monolithic, mono-lingual'[55] unity. Phrases like 'one nation, one people' are irrelevant to India in many ways. In place of attempting to paper over and contain the diversity-disadvantage, we should put it right at the center of our political praxis and development dynamic.

Diversity inevitably entails a certain degree of inequality, and the challenge is to make 'beneficial inequality' a means to help the worst off to become the better off in the society. While it is tempting to think of Indian ethnic groups as entities sharing a common language and territory (to employ classical European terminology), it makes more sense to think of the thousands of India's separate affinities as individual ethnicities, because they share a common descent and customs. "India is interesting because you have different ethnicities speaking the same language," whereas in other regions with environmental or social stratification such as Southeast Asia, "language and religion mark distinction."[56] Let us not forget that it

was the richness and kaleidoscopic character in its scope that evolved into a civilization. India would not be what it is today without its previous history of integration of new peoples into its society.

Here again, how we can manage and modernize can offer lessons to the world. Indian society has never been anything if not about its many divisions and divides. This spirit was best expressed by Sri Aurobindo: "A day will dawn when people of all classes in my country will band together as one living mass at the sacred altar of the World-Mother, represented here by our Motherland and face the rest of [the] world with heads held high."[57] After over 75 years of existence as a country ruled by its chosen leaders, we still have to hang our head down; the people of India have not coalesced into a 'living mass'. They remain divided, and differences and divisions haven't lost their edge. Harmonizing multiplicity and oneness of life is at the heart of the Upanishads, and that is what optimizing diversity is all about. It is to induce complementarity in contrasts, and harmony in heterogeneity, but it must not become antithetical to the sense of an 'undifferentiated unity' of India.

Yet, diversity itself is too diverse to induce 'unity'. For example, religious diversity is at a different level compared with diversity of cuisine or even of custom. This is also where we have failed the most. Making the most of diversity requires us to graciously give room to others' views, beliefs, and convictions in a win–win way. As far as religion is concerned, it is lose–lose all the way. One must adopt a 'differentiated' approach to the 'undifferentiated unity' of India. But what we should not attempt to do is to try to make India a 'melting pot', a bigger version of the

UK or the USA. Such a process of fusion would only result in a witches' brew. Avoiding such a contingency requires a calm, collective, and calibrated approach, an ambience of civility and reciprocal accommodation, which we have woefully failed to bring to bear. Like everything else, it too got polluted by electoral politics. Playing one group against another and fanning the flames of conflicting interests has come to be considered as a necessary evil in democratic dynamics.

Diversity has a dark side too: the economic angle. We can find in India every shade of lifestyle, from some of the world's richest men to the poorest of the poor. We have billionaires who globe-trot just for their shopping, and we also have the wretched who are condemned to live off garbage dumps. There is another downside to governance. It makes decision-making and balancing the trade-off between short- and long-term outcomes very difficult. India is equally diverse when it comes to what we truly care for and what we are passionate about. When it comes to issues that arouse our intense indignation, enough to impel us to question the comforting drift of daily drudgery, the diversity around us is appalling. In short, deprivation of basic human needs will hardly create a flutter in today's indifferent India. It is only when people are deprived of their *felt needs* (or, as some say, fancied needs) that they will become emboldened enough to challenge the awesome power of the modern state. So diverse and discreet are they in India that they are not identical even a few kilometers from each other. In other words, for people power to show up socially, it takes some kind of deprivation of these 'wants', and these can never be uniformly national. The same need is basic as well as redundant from area to area even within the same

state. The same requirement is requisite at one place, and optional or even unnecessary at another place and time. The same applies to our contradictions. India is so diverse that even diversity is diverse across the country. We cannot agree on anything because even our disagreements differ. Contradictions contradict each other on a country-wide scale. All this shrinks the scope for change from within, which could result from a pent-up en masse feeling of revulsion against social injustice and existential emptiness, bringing to mind Jean-Paul Sartre's 1938 novel *Nausea*.

It is increasingly becoming apparent that India's much-lauded multiplicity is increasingly getting weaponized in the war to capture and retain political power. India is as multi-branded as it is antique. The 'brands' are so multiple that dialects, customs, and practices, each of which is equally unique, can change from one location to another within a single town. Logically speaking, a multiplicity of thoughts, ideas, and backgrounds should enrich any society. But for that to happen, society must find a way to harmonize multiple identities, which is where we have failed. Managing multiplicity is not an option for India, it is its life blood; draining it away will make our nation comatose, if not a corpse. Ignoring or underplaying it will dissolve the very glue that held our society (not the state) together for millenniums. Recognizing India's multiplicity means accepting not only the different languages, customs, and conducts inherent to this great nation, but also ensuring that the various trains of thought remain free from fear. Our inherent differences, disparities, and contrariety must be cause for celebration. Our efforts must be directed towards finding a *modus operandi* to encourage respect for each other while ensuring that they are mutually reinforcing. In

the end, India's experiment and experience with diversity will be of immense help to a world that has become weary with so much divisiveness taking root everywhere. This really is how India should project its most economic and enlightened 'soft power' abroad.

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Harnessing Human Capital

Harnessing the human immensity of India

That a society or a nation is nothing if not its people is self-evident. But nowhere is it truer than in India (not even in China). This is not only because India is the most populous nation on earth and it is continental in its composition and its people are legatees of a great civilization. It is also due to another reality that we tend to underestimate: perhaps in no other major nation in the world today is the gap between human and other resources wider. It is almost a cliché to say that India is a 'rich country with poor people'. It happens to be immensely inaccurate on both counts.

To begin with, it is not a naturally rich country relative to its size and in relation to other big countries; it is not even one of the ten countries with the 'most natural resources'.[58] Furthermore, it is critically short of non-ferrous, strategic, and rare minerals, necessary for it to be a great power and to become a low-fossil-fuel-based economy. What is cause for concern is that we are poor at exploiting and optimizing the resources we do have. All this highlights the imperative

to extract the maximum from the one endowment we have in plentitude, which is also happily the most basic—the *human* element. Optimal use of our human resources is vital for three reasons: one, to get the best from our human affluence; two, to make up for the resource-shortfall; and three, to do a better job of making use of what resources we do have. As for the label of 'poor people', firstly it refers to material poverty; and secondly, they were not this way for much of their history. The current poverty in India is a legacy of the more recent history, pure policy failure, and also of governance inadequacies.

Demographically, India has what some call a 'people-problem'. It is not only a matter of numbers and statistics, but also of its worth, value, and validity as a policy priority and a practical swap. It has often been said that unlike in other societies in the West, human life in India is highly devalued. Other than sheer overcrowding, one reason could be that, in India, for anything one wants to achieve, the obstacle often manifests itself as a human being. Who wants to value an impediment? Setting aside all such morally irksome issues, the more topical point is, as Jennifer Sciubba[59] puts it, "We've got this 1.4 billion people in India, and it's up to India to decide whether or not that becomes a resource or a burden." It is a 'make-or-break' matter for the kind of future we want for India. As of now, despite pronouncements and protestations, policies and priorities point towards the latter. In a country that is overflowing with human presence, we haven't figured out how to harmonize the different dimensions of human content in social life and economic activity.

It is almost a cliché to talk of the human resource. In one sense, it is the most renewable of renewable resources;

indeed, it is inexhaustible and ever-replenishing. But the human resource, like any other, can also be misused and misapplied; even more, it can be destructive because it can turn volatile and violent. In India, high numbers have come to replace high quality. On the skill-spectrum, we are usually at the low-end, a source for outsourcing. We take great pride in that because what counts is profit, not high value for our human capital. It is seldom innovative or pioneering. Simply put, our human resource is not resourceful enough, and our productivity is not productive enough, for the country to shed its national tagline of 'underperformance'. We do not realize it, but persistent poverty is a stinging symbol of underperformance. We have 'commodified' the human persona. That is innate to the economic paradigm we have adopted since Independence. We haven't found any formula that is based on the premise that more people at work means more synergetic creativity, more and better production, and greater social good. As a result, we are caught in our own trap, hoisted by our own petard. The country cannot get the best out of its own abundance.

There is no wastage greater in India than that of its human potential. Millions of Indians prefer indolence and work evasion to nation building, and those who really want to contribute have no access to appropriate opportunities. If the system, as we call it for want of a better word, can motivate, inspire, and provide the opportunities for its workforce to put their body and soul into what they do for a living or professionally, India can easily regain, if not surpass, what it was in its distant past. Moreover, in our national resource prioritization, we give least importance to what a human body even minimally requires to be able

give such an input. We forget that for any human endeavor the bottom line is the body, and if the body is emaciated and not healthy and skilled, it cannot perform fully. To prove the point, we just need to look at our annual budgets. India has one of the world's lowest health budgets, in terms of its share of government expenditure. A healthy and happy person is a force multiplier. Conversely an illiterate and malnourished person is a burden. Without realizing this we have come to see population itself in negative terms.

Youth power

Our mistaken idea of an ideal society is a close cluster of less people, less women and more youth. We overrate the population problem, undervalue women power, and mouth platitudes about how precious our youth are. According to our current Prime Minister, "The whole world is looking at India's youth with hope, because [they] are the growth engine of the country, and India is the growth engine of the world."[60] One of five people below the age of 25 in the world is from India. What is significant is that 'it will be the largest consumer and labor source in the knowledge and networking goods economy' and the 'largest pool of global talent'. The world is looking to the youth, not necessarily of India alone, to take the lead, indeed to save the world. The elders of this world have brought the world to the brink of the abyss, be it the specter of climate change or nuclear Armageddon, the reckless and runaway consumerism or suicidal onslaught on global commons. What gives hope for the future is that this emerging generation, although often castigated as hedonistic and self-centered, is trying to see the world through the eyes of the most vulnerable

and oppressed, and to ensure that things are easier for them. Unfortunately, this very generation, even in countries like India—where about 66% of the population, or 800 million, is in the age group of 18–35[61]—is deprived of any say in how their lives are being shaped, and in how policies that affect them are being made. They deserve proportional participation at policy-making levels, including in the parliament and in governance. In the current Lok Sabha, the percentage of those below 40 years is only 13%. It is not only diversity of race, caste, faith, and gender that we need to go further, but also diversity of age.

In actuality, what India needs is not change of the party in power, but a 'regime change' of a different kind—transfer of power from the shaky hands of the tired-but-refusing-to retire fuddy-duddies to the steady hands of the "boiling bravehearts".[62] Experience and freshness, inspiration with intrepidity, must go hand in hand to meet the needs of India now. Although demographically India is a youthful nation in terms of state of mind, it is dowdy and over-the-hill. Those in charge should be those whose future is India's future. That means that those who so far have been relegated to the back seat should cross over to the driver's seat and take over the steering wheel.

Although everyone ritually applauds youth power as a potent game-changer, our actions do not match our rhetoric. According to one estimate, India earmarks less than 1% of the GDP as total investment in its youth, which is hardly commensurate with its size and potential. According to a World Bank report, the projected cost (loss) of not investing in children and youth can be pegged at 4% of the GDP every year. "Of this, the costs of unemployment account for 0.6%. As of 2017–18, youth participation in India's labor

force was 38.3%. Drawing from the 2018 State of Working India Report, we peg the youth unemployment rate to be at least 18.3% (3.47 crore youth). About 30% of youth fall under the 'neither in employment nor in education' category and 33% of India's skilled youth are unemployed."[63]

What is important to note is that the 'problem of employment' is not only about creating jobs, but also about the inability to tackle even more tricky issues: under-employment and disguised employment. It has been said that in India, a job that can be done by one person is being done by four persons. It is also about what job-getting has come to mean. It involves more of who we are, and the community or group we belong to, rather than our capabilities. This is well illustrated by a news story which said that 2.3 million people, including many PhDs, postgraduates and engineers, applied for 368 posts for peons in Uttar Pradesh… jobs that required only a 5th class pass.[64] This should raise many red flags that need to be reviewed to draw the right inference in crafting a national employment policy. Most of all, it tells us that despite all the talk of 'demographic dividend' and lauding of youth power, a section of the youth lacks self-worth and self-belief, and has a dim view of their future. This is in sharp contrast to comparable youth in China. One study found that 'around 70% of current university students still believe that individuals can succeed through hard work, no matter their family background.'[65] It means that by and large, Indian youth are less optimistic about the future than their Chinese counterparts, which could, in the long run, make a critical difference. Some critics warn that the window of opportunity is fast closing, and that India might soon face a double-whammy: India's ageing crisis and a demographic disaster.[66]

Dalliance with diaspora

The term 'diaspora' originates from the Greek term for 'dispersion'. The meaning evolved over time, and now refers to anyone who is a citizen of a certain country and shares a common heritage, ancestry or culture, but resides beyond their homeland for a variety of reasons. Indians live in over 140 countries across the globe. While some identify themselves as first-generation Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), others, whose forefathers emigrated, are termed as People of Indian Origin (PIOs). There are 12 countries which host over a million Indians each, with four of them being home to over two million Indians each. Overseas Indians are said to comprise the world's largest overseas diaspora, estimated around 30 million. The Indian diaspora is increasingly becoming vital in meeting India's goals. Our diaspora across the world can be both the X-factor and force multiplier that India badly needs. The prime reason is simple and straight: India has the 'size' and 'scale', and what it lacks, and where the diaspora can supplement, is providing the scope and skills. If India can fuse the two together, the sky is not the limit to what it can achieve. Let us not altogether ignore the money-factor. Indians abroad in most countries are generally better off than others. Their economic contribution to their host countries is significant. For example, it is estimated that "Every fifth doctor in the US has strong Indian connections. The combined yearly contribution of the Indian diaspora to the American economy is over $1 trillion, which means every dollar out of 26 dollars is contributed by Indians by race and origin."[67]

Here again the fact is that, although the Indian presence overseas is bigger than China's, the contribution of the Chinese diaspora to their country's economic

transformation is much higher. That is primarily because there is a big difference in how overseas Chinese and overseas Indians instinctively feel towards their motherland. For the Chinese, their obligation to China is intrinsic to their being Chinese, and then again China is a single seamless entity. Not so for Indians. It is more mixed, and ambiguous and ambivalent. And that is mutual; India too for long, has been caught in two minds, a motley blend of envy, admiration, affection, regard, resentment.

But then, India abroad is almost equally asunder as India at home. The idea of India is still too abstract and putative; the Indian diaspora's emotional attachment is solely to their home state, town, or village. Many of them left because they didn't do well in India and, while they retain strong family connections, they also retain a strong sense of resentment against the country that they think treated them badly. Despite the avowed intent, governments have still not grasped this in their policy posture towards the non-resident Indians. The posture is the same as what our governments adopt while dealing with the hapless 'people of India' who are at their mercy. It is markedly different from what we exhibit towards a non-Indian-origin foreigner. The focus should not be investment but involvement in infrastructural activities of their choice.

Such involvement doesn't have to be another kind of *ghar wapsi*, or returning home. Those who wish to, will anyway find a way. The rest would remain where they are, pursue their occupations and avocations, and yet, can be enabled to lend a hand. Their support can take multiple forms, not merely monetary assistance; they could offer technical inputs, time-sharing, help reconstruct schools, build hospitals, or even help connect villages to highways.

We need to foster institution-to-institution linkages. In all this, governments from both the sides can play a crucial role. A good example was the agreement (2021) between India and Japan to allow Indian professionals in certain fields such as nursing, construction, agriculture, and fisheries to work in Japan as 'specified skilled workers' and further advance their technical skills in the process.

India cannot afford to remain silent on this critical issue. Otherwise, this 'dividend' too will go the way of the others. However hurtful to our ego it might be, the incontrovertible truth is that the non-participation of our overseas brethren in India's growth story will leave a gaping hole which cannot be filled by anyone else. We can no longer ignore or wish away the stark contrast between 'India abroad' and 'India at home'. Indian-origin people account for just about 1% of the US population and 6% of Silicon Valley's workforce, and yet are disproportionately represented in the top brass. One-third of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are of Indian-origin. What is frustrating is that no one is able to fathom or unmask 'the secret sauce behind'[68] their rise. Maybe because none exists, but theories abound. Some say that no other nation in the world 'trains' so many citizens in such a gladiatorial manner as India does, and that growing up in India makes them 'natural managers'. It is even being said that "this latent hunger is very much ingrained in the DNA of the Indian manager."[69] If so, why do they fail and even mismanage India? We supposedly have the 'best Constitution', 'best administrators' (the IAS), and best managers and engineers; then, what ails India? Why does mediocrity rule the roost in India in every sphere and activity, and this despite the stuffy feeling we all entertain—not so very accurate, as it

now seems—that we are a very 'intelligent' people? Why do we settle for less so effortlessly? Why do we seek safety in numbers, not in the content? That assumption itself needs a relook.

First, our kind of 'intelligence' has only accentuated our differences, rather than help us build bridges and break down walls. Many of our intelligent people work at cross purposes, not collectively. Second, we give too much importance to proficiency in English as a measure of intelligence. That inhibits creative thinking in other languages. One of the most damaging and debilitating things the British did to India was the deliberate emasculation of native languages, dwarfing even the imposition of English. As Rakesh Sinha put it, "The colonial masters were not only interested in making students learn how to use English, but also intended to completely cut off children from their mother tongues. This objective was achieved by employing force, treachery, and greed."[70] In colonial Africa, one of the punishments for speaking one's native tongue in the school was either lashes on bare buttocks or being made to "carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as '*I am stupid*' or '*I am a donkey*'."[71] Maybe over time the Indian mind began to believe that not to be 'stupid' and to be intelligent, is to be good in English.

One of the myths we all instinctively indulge in is that Indians are intelligent. Even according to the normal measure of intelligence—defined as the ability to think, to learn from experience, to solve problems, and to adapt to new situations—India's standing appears dismal. In a comparative ranking by IQ of countries worldwide, India stood at 25, with an IQ score of 83, while China stood at 3, with an IQ score of 104. For further contrast, Singapore,

Taiwan, Korea were on top of the list; even Cambodia stood at 16 (IQ 91).[72]

Even worse, we fare poorly in terms of emotional and interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, which is possibly why our integrity is even lower than our intelligence. Then again, why do the same skills and brand of intelligence take Indians to the top when they are away from India, while they fail in India? A common refrain is what is euphemistically called 'work culture', the attitudes, beliefs, and ambience that make up the regular atmosphere in an Indian work environment, which rewards mendacity, respects hierarchy, and smothers initiative, innovation and risk-taking. The same person working in the same company feels restrained and constrained in India, and free and liberated when posted outside. But why? Some say that "it is a matter of character together with a deficit of true faith in oneself that for want of a better word one might term lack of *atma-vishvas*… India's image in the collective mirror is responsible for the loss of *atma-vishvas*."[73]

Maybe the reason why we individually and collectively, do not deliver to our full potential in whatever we do anywhere, is a part of the toxic after effects of alien subjugation for prolonged period. Alien rule is oppression, and that leads to 'suppression', which prevents the full flowering of potential. After a time, that becomes a state of mind that finds comfort in being contained and controlled. It is something we haven't got rid of after 75 years, and continues to afflict and impair everyone in India. No one can get out of it except when out of India. What is incomprehensible is how some of them, cut off from their roots in India, become 'incredible', while Indian society, substantially, if not wholly, is stuck in mediocrity. Working

with such people will force us to see how 'excellence' works, and that itself could provide an opening for a way out. The Indian government would do well to capitalize on their know-how and expertise by engaging with them at a more personal level, as well as eliciting their instructional inputs—public healthcare and the developmental sectors could reap benefits. A single body and an interactive-website, which matches the skill-sets of the individual with the corresponding area of contribution, would help in synergizing this sector—this too could be channeled under the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA). A suitable model to draw on is the African Foundation for Development (AFFORD), which connects Africans abroad directly with non-profits in Africa working towards the same developmental goals.

In the meantime, we must explore how we can inspire and mobilize people's skills for nation-building in a manner each Indian is comfortable with. What is alarming is that only 5% of India's workforce is formally skilled today, according to the World Economic Forum. A new challenge for Indian diplomacy, in India's far-flung embassies and consulates (if needed we must open more) would be to contact every NRI and solicit his or her views and ideas on how they see themselves as contributing to the rise and rehabilitation of India; how, where, and in what way they can help their homeland. First, we must allow 'dual-citizenship', like most other countries, subject to national security compulsions. That removes many legal hurdles. The specific choice must be left to the NRIs themselves, or to their nominees back home, who should be fully involved throughout the process. This has to be done wherever there are any NRIs, not necessarily only in the USA or UK. We

need to formulate a range of fully fleshed out schemes that could be presented, and if need be, new ones can be added.

Making the passage back to India easy for the Indian diaspora is the first step. Making them feel wanted and valued, without creating a domestic backlash is the next and more difficult step. When they are abroad, they are Non-Resident Indians; once back, they become Nervously-Returned Indians. As author Salman Rushdie said about his diaspora status, "Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools."[74] It is high time these two stools are conjoined to each other to make a comfortable seat on which returning Indians can sit and contribute to India's growth story. Despite the creation of several schemes like Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES), Global Pravasi Rishta Portal, The Overseas India Facilitation Centre, and voting rights and OCI cards, a lot of headway remains.

What is imperative now is a shift in emphasis on twin aspects: one, from investment to inputs; two, in addition to across-the-board schemes, each individual *pravasi bharatiya* should be entitled to modify or formulate his or her own scheme to contribute, whether it is laying a rural road or upgrading a local hospital or a school, to creating and reinforcing India's many mini-Silicon Valleys. A tiny activity, neglected by the government, can have a huge spin-off effect like a road connecting a village to a town. The government is focusing on expressways and highways, and rural connectivity is the casualty. What we do not recognize is that despite huge urbanization much of India is still rural. According to one estimate, India's rural population is at 1.03 billion, and at least six in every ten Indians continue to live in rural areas.[75] Studies have shown that "In the

villages which provide better road infrastructure and bus service, people are more likely to commute to nearby towns and work rather than migrate away to big cities."[76]

Our diaspora can fill a critical void, and provide a big boost to Indian economy. It should not matter whether it is low-tech or high-tech, cash or kind, time-sharing or skill-sharing. That also needs the cooperation of the host country, and India's foreign policy should factor this in as a major objective. The important thing is to gather and garner a driven drive and inspired and passionate commitment to lend a hand, however trivial or titanic, minute or heroic, to help India to get out of the quagmire of mediocrity.

To sum up, just as our human promise is immense, so is the task of harnessing it to its best advantage in achieving our goals as well as gaining commensurate global leverage. The latter comes from the strong possibility that India is set to supply approximately 24.3% of the global workforce over the next decade,[77] positioning it as the foremost provider of human resources worldwide. And our brethren beyond our borders constitute a pool of highly skilled professionals who are marking their mark in every walk of modern life. Motivating and making it possible for them to choose how they wish to contribute to human development of India must be a pressing policy priority. Another emerging advantage is that India's median age is 28.4 years, compared to Japan's 48.6 years, America's 38.5 years, and China's 38.4 years. It is clear that India wants to become the human resource capital of the world. Here too, our policies and actions do not match our rhetoric. Our investments and incentives fall far below the bar. There is a high risk of promise becoming a peril. Particularly if youth power is allowed to get alienated, exasperated, and embittered,

that can easily turn the 'revolution of rising frustrations'[78] into a 'revolution of rising fury'. There are ominous signs that this is what is happening in India. The youth too are not immune to what ails society. Human development must be the fulcrum of sustainable development. Indeed, in the Indian context, it must be both the means and the end, the path to and the purpose of, development and growth. Although it is such a life and death issue, India's rank in the UN Human Development index is 132 out of 191 countries, a slight drop from the previous year due to factors related alarmingly to factors like life expectancy and schooling. China, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Bhutan are better-off.

The basic bedrock must be the well-being, health and happiness of India's citizens, starting from the bottom. Development must be multi-pronged not only in terms of sectors like education, health, and employment, but also be location-specific. The averages for a place like India can be indicative but also deceptive. Each locality has specific resources, faces a specific set of problems, and also a special set of opportunities along with a unique set of feasible policies. Each must be tackled specifically through a bottom-up strategy. The challenge is to convert India's human abundance and diversity into the kind of transformational force it needs to make a quantum leap.

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6

Radical Reforms That India Needs

Construction of India's First 'Indian' Constitution

Any effort to frame an agenda for any kind of new India must give the pride of place to giving the nation its second Constitution—this time an *Indian* Constitution, germane to the soil and soul of the land, inspired and influenced by its own ancient civilization, and taking full note of its preceding precedents and practices. The present Constitution simply hasn't worked, and there is enough blame to spread all over. That is borne by the fact it was amended a whopping 105 times but never given a holistic look, despite dramatic changes in the Indian polity embracing every dimension. Maybe it will be nibbled away another hundred times. However, any whisper of a total and comprehensive review will invite an avalanche of attacks from the opposition, cutting across the political spectrum, and above all from the judiciary, which now enjoys, under the aegis of the Constitution itself, more power that its counterpart anywhere else. The one attempt to give a completely new look at the Constitution in its entirety came a cropper. India's constitutional affliction is double-faced: it is being governed under a Constitution that is simply un-Indian and unbecoming; and those 'in control and operating it'

have developed a double-fear: the fear of losing the perks of power, and the fear of opening a Pandora's box. The political class is opposed not because how a major change might affect the country, but because every party would be worried that the other party could get a leg up.

Our Constitution's cardinal error lay in its very original intent, which was to morph polycentric India into a one-nation-one-people model, on the premise that difference and diversity could come in the way of a merged personhood, and emanate an anti-national narrative. It is important to note that, in comparison with India, North America and Europe are less heterogeneous—ethnically, genetically, religiously and linguistically. Migration and immigration played a large part in the case of Europe. On the other hand, India's diversity and heterogeneity have always been integral to its ancestry, and it will remain so for eons to come.

Many of the assumptions implicit in our Constitution, including its basic architecture, such as the separation of powers between the legislature, judiciary, and executive, have not worked. Today, almost every constitutional organ is either not discharging its assigned duty, or misapplying and misdirecting its statutory authority. It is sad but true that Ambedkar's vision of Indian federalism as 'dual polity' has simply got lost in the woods, not least because, to make it work, it required people of a higher moral caliber than we could muster. The Constitution was amended to add 'integrity' to its lofty preamble, but those in charge have themselves proven unworthy.

And yet, politicians vie with each other to pay ritual obeisance and allegiance to it and openly call it a 'holy book'. But that 'holiness' does not prevent it from

being trampled over when it suits political profiteering. This has led to a kind of civil war between its various organs and constituents, each accusing the other of acting 'unconstitutionally'. This does not happen in the UK or USA, because the former is wholly unitary, and the second is fully federal. The Indian Constitution is a poor amalgam of constitutions of many nations, and of the 1935 Government of India Act, which Nehru denounced as a 'new charter of slavery'. Many things about it are amiss, but its fatal flaw was not that it had heavily borrowed from alien constitutions, but that it chose to ignore our own past experiences and the experiments and the ideas of great thinkers like M.N. Roy and Mahatma Gandhi. For a country so multicentric and multilayered, much of which is so dissimilar, it is not possible to govern it with a sole source of sovereignty. It can only be run on the basis of a 'shared sovereignty' and a 'divided authority'. While there should be no monopoly anywhere, the golden rule has to be to accord the maximum sovereignty and power to people-proximate representative bodies. That must be 'constitutionalized'.

The 'basic structure' of our Constitution—the Westminster style parliamentary system—was decided in the summer of 1946, during a Congress Party meeting, and then shepherded through the Constitution-making process as a party directive. Neither B.R. Ambedkar nor Sardar Patel were in favor of a strictly parliamentary system. Nor was Gandhi, for that matter. During the debate, it was even said that it had failed in the West and that it would create hell in our country: "If we take into consideration the unrepresentative character of the Draft Constitution that is before us and its nature and structure, we come to

the conclusion that it is not in harmony with our present conditions, our culture and our customs. Therefore, it is necessary that we should postpone its consideration for the time being and should form a new Constituent Assembly on the basis of adult franchise so that it may go through this Constitution, consider it and amend it where necessary."[1]

What this tells us is that the Constitution that came to life in 1950 did not really reflect the combined wisdom of our leaders of that time, and that we shouldn't feel we are in any way slighting them by supporting any initiative to move on to a 'new constitution'. What is ironic is that today's political class is being more loyal than the king in their devotion to the Constitution. Nehru, the real moving spirit behind the Constitution, called it 'provisional', and Patel gave it a short, ten-year life span. Ambedkar, who has now acquired god-like stature in India, and is announced as the Constitution's chief architect, later described his role as that of a hack. The Draft Constitution was also faulted by some: "[Its] wordings express more the quantitative side of democracy, more the number, more the numerical strength, and not the moral force, the spiritual backing, the intrinsic value that a sound democracy should have."[2]

Its deficiencies and defects became apparent soon thereafter. None less than Nehru as the Prime Minster wrote to the Chief Minsters saying that "If the Constitution itself comes in our way, then surely it is time to change that Constitution." Succeeding iconic Prime Ministers as diverse as Indira Gandhi and A.B. Vajpayee echoed the same sentiment. Yet nothing happened. Instead of a holistic approach, we chose piecemeal nibbling and itemized amendments, which actually made it more hotchpotch and muddled. In 2005, noted jurist Fali S. Nariman, in a

lecture titled '*The Silences in Our Constitutional Law*', prophesied that "We will never be able to piece together a new Constitution in the present day and age even if we tried…"[3] That has become infinitely more impossible, but also more imperative.

Let us also be clear on one brutal truth. As more time passes, the closer we edge towards collapse. The remedy is not to make India either a fully-federal state (like the USA) or a confederation (like Switzerland); or switch to a presidential form of government. Such a perspective is another evidence of how much our thinking is conditioned by mediocrity, which limits even our ability to imagine constitutional alternatives. What India missed out on in 1950, and what we must have, is something consistent with its own 'molecule of life', as it were, a fundamental and inseparable part of its own nature, character and ethos. The land of India has been thought of and considered as an indivisible whole by its inhabitants cutting across kingdoms and republics for long. That was primarily possible because our people were, overall, self-governing and in charge of what was needed for organized, orderly lives, through representative bodies physically closest and proximate. Who the sovereign ruler was, was less important. That is still the only way a society like ours can be effectively governed. Such a paradigm automatically precludes any danger of India slipping into a single-party hegemony and cultural homogenization. In a country as polycentric and polysemic as India, that is the only way to ensure the requisite of a true democracy, which, as political scientist Robert Dahl (polyarchy) puts it, is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals with unimpaired opportunities.

The national need can't be any clearer but what is obscure is how to go about it, in order to effect a successful constitutional change. We must also be very clear that we can't fix what is broken by cleansing the political establishment, or by getting 'better men' elected to high office, or through 'better policies'. These are necessary but not sufficient. In India today, there is no coherent constituency or any ardent advocacy group in favor of even a modest constitutional morphing. On the other hand, there is in place a constellation of disparate but determined status quo zealots, each with his/her own vested interest. Some fear the process itself; some the outcome. Yet others would oppose any such move on the ground that it is a ruse to change the existing Constitution's hallowed features like its 'secular' character. And then there are some 'do-gooders' who fear any change will be tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater, thereby unleashing unforeseeable forces. Another almost insurmountable adversary is the apex court of India, called the most powerful court in the world, which enjoys almost a *carte blanche* from the Constitution itself. By its 'sanctity of the basic structure' judgment, the apex court has virtually blocked all avenues that could make way for mending the mistake made in the beginning and learn from the lessons learnt in the last seventy-five years.

The question that arises is this: Through what modality and mechanism can the people of India collectively decide whether or not they want to 'give to themselves' a new Constitution? In many other democracies, in the normal course, the will and wish of the people on governance is expected to get reflected through two avenues: elections or referendums. While many other constitutions including the UK have referendums, we don't have that avenue. Elections

per se cannot directly serve the purpose or give the needed moral imprimatur. That is because what happens between elections is even more important than holding 'free and fair' elections. In India, that has gone horribly askew. Elections are not only not 'free and fair', they have made nothing else 'free' or 'fair'. What it amounts to is that "the freedom to vote has become another good that many voters must often purchase, ironically, by giving up their freedom of choice."[4] Or could it be that the Indian voter has become so street smart that he wants to retain the 'freedom of choice' even after 'losing it' by selling? We are short of integrity even in cheating.

If elections and referendums are ruled out as a way to kick-start the process of designing a new Constitution, what is the way out? India confronts an impassable impasse. Constitutional change is what the country most needs, without which there is no hope of breaking the impasse. What we must do is clear; the how is the only question. As the law of the land stands, with the powers of parliament radically trimmed by the Supreme Court, the current Constitution of India has acquired a transcendental position, an apotheotic status. What is ironic that those who gave it to us clearly did not intend it to be that way—it was meant to be provisional and short-lived. So, if the framers of our Constitution had themselves envisioned change, and if conditions warrant it, who are we to stand in the way for our own particular purposes? And whose constitution will this be, anyway? When some say that 'the Constitution is supreme', what does that mean? How does that make it eternal? The primary motive is morbid mistrust of heady 'majoritarianism', or to save the country from 'the abyss of unrestrained power'.[5] To obviate that possibility

or feared risk, we are asked to live with a Constitution that is demonstrably ill suited in its origin and reinforced by its subsequent working. In other words, the thesis is that even if the Constitution is evil, it is a lesser evil than allowing any elected government any time from meddling or messing with it. What kind of a democracy is it if its principal aim is to ensure that parliament does not run amuck like a drunken driver?

The only way is to be choosy about whom we put behind the wheel, whom we cherry pick as our rulers. Then again, what about the possibility of a group of judges exercising unelected absolute power? Who, in this case, can bell the cat? The sad state of India today is that we all think the worst of each other, that eventually rogues and rascals will democratically come to power and destroy democracy, like what Hitler did to Nazi Germany. A democracy anchored in an 'intention to malign and malafide intention' is worse than a benign autocracy. The bottom line is that we are in a logjam and must find a way to wriggle out. We must think innovatively and unconventionally. When we look at India holistically and practically, what stands out is that the Supreme Court is now calling the shots on every issue, and is the court of last resort. That is both inherent and axiomatic. Whichever, the apex court is playing an activist—or 'adventurist', as some like to describe—role in Indian polity and civic space.

The other power center that has arisen is what we might call street power—aggrieved or otherwise induced or motivated people taking to the streets and looting and destroying public property. Such is the state of India that mob violence is not a matter of law and order or rule of law; it is being seen as a legitimate response and reaction

to the closure of constitutional remedies. The rule of law is seriously endangered; what we have is rule by law, and condescension and contempt for law. Some see the two developments—judicial activism and the advent of street power—as disturbing and potentially perfidious. But, as the saying goes, desperate times require desperate measures. We should find a way to mobilize those very twin powers to bail India out. For, whatever the Supreme Court does, under the Indian Constitution, is automatically both legal and legitimate. It has enormous power to do what it decides to do, beyond those that are traditional in a federal structure. One such measure is Article 142 of the Indian Constitution, the like of which exists nowhere except in Bangladesh (Article 104) and Nepal (Article 88[2]), both of which were obviously inspired by the Indian example. Article 142 states that "the Supreme Court in the exercise of its jurisdiction may pass such decree or make such order as is necessary for doing complete justice in any cause or matter pending before it." The Court can exercise this power without being bound by the relevant provisions of procedure, if it is satisfied that the departure from the said procedure is necessary to do 'complete justice' between the parties.

What is astonishing is that such an extraordinary clause was passed without any debate in the Constituent Assembly on 17 May 1949. By invoking this article, the apex court itself could play an avant garde role in setting into motion the complex process of constitutional change. The ambit and sway of the Supreme Court flowing from this authority vested in it is truly staggering, and, given its gravity, the Court was expected to invoke it on the rarest of rare occasions. Some of the significant judgments where

the apex court invoked Article 142 are: the Bhopal Gas Tragedy compensation case (1989), the liquor sale ban (2016), the release of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi assassination case convict A.G. Perarivalan (2022), and the Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid land dispute case (2023). The list is an odd assortment but none of them, except partially perhaps the last one, were worthy of that august article. In any case, none of them came even close in importance to matters of 'complete justice', in relation to breaking the deadlock of initiating a process to give India its second Constitution, particularly because the Court itself took away the powers bestowed, in the Constitution, to the parliament. There cannot possibly be another case that involves more compelling 'complete justice' to the people of India than this. By playing such a role and filling such a critical void, the Court will achieve a double purpose: one, reassert its 'supreme' constitutional authority; and two, come out as the savior of the nation and the champion of the people.

But to prod and push, cajole and convince the Supreme Court to take such an activist and inventive initiative will not be easy. It has boxed itself in through its 'Basic structure' judgment. Resorting to Article 142 does not require it to cancel the judgment. Yet it might still see that as a threat to the 'uniquely extraordinary powers' it now has under the present Constitution. It is here that 'street power' can come handy. To induce it to overcome such hesitation, and to put decisive pressure on the apex court, the people of India should do what the citizens of Chile did for a similar purpose: summon the might of people-power; and stage an event similar to the so-called 'biggest march of Chile', which took part in the capital Santiago on 25 Oct

2019, with more than 1.2 million people participating. The Chilean experience gives us pointers to what we should and shouldn't, on how to do and what not to do. The people of Chile rejected what was universally hailed as a unique progressive social experiment, although almost everyone detests the present Constitution. In the case of India, we are sleep-walking… such that despite obvious signs about its not-too-distant implosion, no one even notices them. The experiment failed in Chile because people feared it threatened the integrity of Chile, and the process alienated the opponents.

In our case, it is far more acute. India is too vast and disparate, and the reasons for opposition are also diverse. The process has to be genuinely consultative, consensual, and inclusive of every section and ideological spectrum, ignoring none, least of all the political class. Their marginalization was one reason for the Chilean failure. Chile has shown how street power, which now violently manifests mostly for sectarian purposes, can be turned into a constructive game-changer. For India, we need to do such a 'march' in every state capital besides the national capital. Once that happens, many politicians and public intellectuals and opinion-makers, who are currently sitting on the fence, might find it politically safer to espouse that cause and stimulate a comprehensive constitutional conversation across the country.

The Supreme Court can direct that a more formal way should be found to elicit the view and voice of the people on the need or otherwise for a referendum on the issue of constituting a new constituent assembly. Another alternative could be to direct the Election Commission to use the next general elections in 2024 to seek the people's opinion on

constituting a constituent assembly, or any other way to kick-start the framing of the Second Constitution for the Republic of India. While this is unchartered territory and one loaded with many imponderables, this is the nearest one can visualize as the only way to 'constitutionally' start and orchestrate a process that could conclude as India's truly first 'Indian Constitution and the beginning of the Second Republic', without the convulsion of a revolution.

The new constitution must have the imprint of an altogether different philosophy—bottom-up governance, and centered on people's health and happiness. It must draw heavily on India's own democratic and republican traditions, models, and practices spread over several centuries. But it should not make the mistake we made in our first attempt, when we almost literally lifted isolated ideas from a motley mix of alien, mostly Western constitutions. We should, this time, deeply study our own precedents and use them appropriately. Where modification is required, there should be no hesitation, but the endeavor should be to anchor it in our own ancestor's fingerprints and footprints, genre and genius. That would not only make its structure and substance more apt and felicitous, but also more doable and user-friendly. What is important is not to lose the laser-like focus. The direction now should be to move away wholesale from both the unitary or semi-federal or federal models (which are being called into question now the world over), and move the epicenter of governance to the deepest depth and closest to the people of the country. It must make plurality and diversity of the country its basic building block. We must put in place structures and arrangements that genuinely allow people to be in the driver's seat; to run their own affairs, to deploy their reserves and resources,

skills and talents to cater to their particular priorities. In short, we must constitutionally relocate the ground-zero of political power and policy-making and economic management to constitutionally empowered institutions at the ground level.

This cannot be done through amendments and additions to the existing statute. We have had 106 amendments for no avail. It has to be an altogether different initiative, with a different philosophy, focus and power disposition. This time it should not be a rush job, and must be for the long haul. But all this will take time, at least a few years. Fortunately, we have a solid basis to make some improvements. The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC, established in 2000, and headed by Justice Venkatachaliah, and consisting of very eminent public figures) labored over two years and produced a voluminous report with several very valuable recommendations. Those recommendations should be revived and given another look and could be implemented.

The entire exercise of a radical, no-holds-barred constitutional review, with the objective of giving India its first 'Indian' Constitution must be at the very top of the nation's agenda. It is also important to reiterate that this Constitution must do what the existing one did not, to deal with the economic and development dimension. Political and economic issues are increasingly intertwined, and India needs radical reform in its economic policy-making and macro and microeconomic managements to lift the lives of those left behind by the neoliberal model it has followed. We need policies as well as appropriate structures and agencies to ensure economic equity and social justice. All said, the required change must have constitutional legitimacy,

without which it will be impossible to break the current paradigm that enables and empowers the elite plutocracy that controls the country.

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Grassroots Democracy/Governance

Democracy and proximate governance

It is becoming increasingly clear that one major fallout of our ill-suited Constitution has been its negation of what democracy should be all about. What comes to mind is the famous phrase of Abraham Lincoln: '*Of the people, by the people, and for the people*'. To actualize those words, we need to have a system of governance that enables, facilitates, and supports the fullest participation of the nation's people in running their own lives, identifies their real needs, and determines how to meet those needs. National governance is necessarily multilayered. The balance and disposition of statutory powers between different representative bodies differs, reflecting the nation's history, genius, culture, and societal composition and size. That dictates the devolution of powers of governance, with a particular position serving as the center of gravity commensurate with its particular context. The bigger the country, the more complex the governance. The only way to ensure that the people's will and wish come to bear, as best as it is possible, on how the country is administered, is to situate that center of

gravity in the theater where the drama of their daily life is enacted, thereby shifting as much decision-making and political authority as practical to the lowest geographic or social level. Such governance is variously termed *grassroots governance*, or local or self-governance, decentralized governance, etc. The nearest approximation to self-governance is proximate governance.

The closest an individual could get to the sense that he or she is in control of his or her own life, while living in a community, is to vest such power in a proxy that he or she can control. In modern democracies, that is possible only through independent constitutional empowerment of collectively chosen local bodies. The soft underbelly, the chink in the armor of Indian democracy and its Constitution is its deliberate disregard and disrespect of this dimension of good governance. The fulcrum and pivot, hub and heart of any meaningful reform, transformation, or renaissance of India must give central importance to this aspect.

Up front, without much ado, even at the risk of tiresome repetition, we must realize that nothing good can happen if we view and treat India as if it is a homogenous, humongous mass, whose problems can be resolved through top-down, expert-driven and nation-wide plans, programs, and strategies. Therefore, any approach to bringing about a 'new' India would necessarily imply an about-face, a total change of direction from the present. How can one incubate and orchestrate such a moral mutation in a country where the new normal is the post-truth, and where everyone believes everyone else is a scoundrel in a sheep's clothing, and in a society with a huge trust deficit all over?

The world over, there is a new awareness of the dimension and dynamic of proximate governance, that

systemic problems are best addressed and carried out at the local level through cooperative communities. A study sponsored by McKinsey Global Institute starts off with the statement, "Our world is big and complex, but human progress is still about life on the ground, up close and in detail."[6] There is an emerging consensus that 'the local' matters. What we do locally really does have a disproportionate impact on both our economic and social well-being, and our life expectancy. This is what is called subsidiarity in political science—the idea that you should devolve decision-making to the lowest level that you can to get the best outcomes. Democracy best delivers when political power is vested in a local community and common members, instead of in isolated, atomized individuals at the apex of the system. It works the other way too. A vibrant and powerful local democracy creates the basis for building strong communities. When citizens come together to make decisions about the place they know best, towns, cities, and villages can flourish. It is only at this level that is it possible to give effect to what Karl Marx characterized as "an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (*The Communist Manifesto*).

Responsive resource allocation is possible only at the ground level. By its very nature, proximate democracy is put to action through a mosaic of norms, customs, values, social processes, and informal institutional apparatus fuelled by the commitment and élan of ordinary people. For such governance to be effective and practical, one must also involve 'community organizing'—a process where people who live in a state of 'adjacent advantage' of each other, or who share some common problem, come together into

an organization that acts in their shared self-interest. To exercise that 'advantage', one needs to bring about a drastic realignment of political, economic, and administrative power, the center of gravity of which must move downwards to the ground, where people live their lives, where they make a livelihood and lead a lifestyle. While for the world it is a welcome recognition and realization for India, people being enabled and empowered to run their daily lives has been part of the Indian civilization.

That was the connecting thread of governance in our distant past, which lasted even in the medieval and Mughal times. It was the British who 'bureaucratized' governance in India, which we still persist with in spirit. The way to 'de-bureaucratize' India is by way of institutionalization of people power. While for the British it was the only way they could directly administer India, for the new rulers of 'free' India it was a critical cog in the wheel of making India one nation, with a strong center. In one sense, good governance is good 'prioritization', to balance and choose the order of priority among equally pressing needs and competing commitments. That is also the only way to marshal and mobilize the needed resources. That is where India has faltered. India should marshal and channel all its resources for economic growth and social equity. The foundation of that has to be local.

One of the lessons of over 75 years is that we haven't done very well in harmonizing equality and equity. Indeed, in trying to manage inequality we have worsened inequity. It is important to note that not all inequalities are unjust, but that all inequities are the product of unjust inequalities. In our policy-making, we have not made this distinction, which must be redressed now. Implicitly, the country has

acquiesced in a trade-off between equity in public jobs and merit in the private sector. What is troubling though is that the private sector too is falling short. There is little doubt that the policy of reservations, while inherently sound and positive, has led to communities and castes competing with one another, even resorting to violence, to be classified as backward for the sake of reservations. Acknowledging it does not amount to negating the need, it is nevertheless important. Harmonizing colliding social priorities and economic imperatives is the heartbeat of good governance. The approach should be to focus on the economic end-product, not leave economics to design the end-product.

Towards that end, we, as a society, must also change the directional focus on to the priorities, areas, sectors, and problems that should receive maximum attention and all available means. Whether we like it or not, in a highly politicized democracy like India, this more than anything else, is no exception. We should move the needle, as it were, to explicitly empower marginalized and vulnerable sections: to ameliorate the daily drudgery of a housewife in small towns and villages, rather than pander to the conveniences of the metropolitan *memsaab*; to address the needs of a rural consumer than the wants of the urban customer; to attend to the requirements of small-scale and cottage industries; to work towards hinterland connectivity with suburban stations and public transport. Above all else, the key is to make all governance proximate and intimate to where ordinary people live, labor, and eke out a living anonymously.

What one must note is that changes in the rajas or regimes of yore did not overly affect the life of the people where they lived. The people continued to manage their

affairs in their village councils undisturbed by bigger events. The revenue of the state was collected through the agency of panchayats. The latter also administered civil and criminal justice. The headman of the village and the *patwari* performed their usual functions of collecting land revenue and submitting the same to the treasury. It was an economy of vicinity, a means to ensure freedom and to protect the rights and interests of local/weaker sections and communities against exploitation by the marauding mandarins of the 'free market' economy. In such a social compact, a citizen shapes what the choices (political and economic) are, not just accepting what he is offered as the limits of possibility. In this model, power was ascending, proximate and reflective of the represented—not descending, trickle down, and distant.

India's classical democratic traditions saw *social need* as superior to *individual wants*. In Bharat, that is now India, grassroots governance was called *Sangha* or *Gana-Rajya*. In the Vedic period of India, the *raja* (king) of a *gana* (a tribal organization) was elected by the gana. The raja always belonged to the Kshatriya *varna* (warrior class), and was typically a son of the previous raja. However, the *gana* members had the final say in his elections. Even during the Sangam Period (circa 6th century BCE), people elected their representatives by casting their votes, and the 'ballot boxes' (usually clay pots) were tied by rope and sealed. After the election, the votes were taken out and counted. The Pala King Gopala (c. 750s–770s CE) in early medieval Bengal was elected by a group of feudal chieftains. During the Chola Empire (920 CE), in Uttaramerur (in present-day Tamil Nadu), palm leaves were used for selecting the village committee members. The leaves, with the

names of candidates written on them, were put inside a clay pot. To select the committee members, a young boy was asked to take out as many leaves as the number of positions available. This was known as the *Kudavolai* system.[7] It is worth emphasizing that, as S.N. Agarwal points out, "the type of decentralized democracy that India had carefully evolved and maintained for centuries in the form of Village Republics was not a relic and survival of tribal communism; it was a product of mature thought and serious experimentation. The kind of local self-government that our country had developed in her numberless Village Communities stood the test of centuries of political storms and is still capable of being organized into an ideal form of democratic administration."[8]

The grassroots concept was traditionally aimed at averting conflict and encouraging economic stability, and promoting unity and cooperation. All the castes and communities were dependent on each other. The farmer could not do without the weaver, the carpenter, the doctor, and the priest; and these in their turn needed him for their food. They were like the parts of an organism, each vital for the other and incapable of surviving apart from the other.

According to Radhakumud Mookerji, it was a 'triune structure', which was "neither pluralistic nor monistic in its trend and type, but a balanced synthesis of three distinct and co-existing elements, the State with its jurisdiction as represented by the *Danda*, the individual on the Road to Freedom (*Mukti*), and the various intermediary groups, functional, local or voluntary."[9] It is important to note that the polity of India then was completely different from the current governing paradigm, with the nation-state as the sole expression of the collective will and personality,

the supreme source of fiats and laws, and the ultimate seat of power and responsibility. The locus of power was then nearby, at the level where people lived, worked, and died, and the needs of daily life were met in the nearness of each other. It was the way to ensure and insure that the focus of political power—the ability to control the use of resources, to influence the policies, functions and culture of the society—was participatory, both as stakeholders and shareholders. That was also a way to relocate the bulk of the functions of government from the capital to various parts, and facilitate the smooth flow of government services and facilities and development schemes to every nook and corner. The clutch of village-oriented schemes like Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY) launched in 2024, and the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grama Jyothi Yojana (DDUGJY) are useful but are best marginal in making a difference. There is no substitute to complete constitutional devolution of political, administrative, and financial power to grassroots institutions. These schemes also show that there is just so much that the best of top-down good governance can do. Such governance should be local and micro-regional.

India's Constitution: negation of the local

The problem began with our Constitution. The draft Constitution prepared in 1948 had effectively no place for this concept of proximate governance. It was not an act of only omission but commission; it was not a victim of oversight, but of an ideological choice. Undoubtedly, it was one of the most fateful choices made by our leaders seventy-five years ago. In their view, self-governance came to be identified with the village, and that in turn attracted

a lot of red flags. No less a person than B.R. Ambedkar passionately voiced it by saying, "What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit."[10] He even said that the Indian village is the very negation of a republic. It was a very damaging statement, a downward slide in the way India was imagined, understood and defined as civilization, nation, and society, and a virtual rejection of India's timeless traditions. Ambedkar had the vocal support of none less than Jawaharlal Nehru, who once wrote to Gandhi stating that "A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment." That it was deliberate and intentional becomes clear when we take note of what the others said. It was specifically pointed out that the constitution of a free country should be based on 'local self-government', which really is democracy in depth, and added that the future Constitution of India should have a pyramidal structure, and "In the long run, local autonomy for each village must constitute the basic framework for the future freedom of this country… Resuscitating of the villages… should be the first task of the future free India."[11]

India became free to make its own future, riding on what Emile Durkheim called the 'cult of the individual' as the basic unit, repudiating what Gandhi called *village swaraj*, and M.N. Roy called *people's committees*. For the record, Gandhi, in his statement at the 1931 Round Table Conference in London, suggested that villages should be the electoral units to the Federal Legislature.

The Constituent Assembly debated making the 'village' (by which it meant local communities) the basic

unit of government and the heart of the Constitution; it is really hard to accept but true that the proposal failed as the discussion took place 'too late'. It means that India got a Constitution with a wrong focus and orientation for want of 'timely time'! What is baffling is that we refuse to make amends even now. Maybe, we must wait for another 'timely time' for that…

If democracy means people's participation in running their own lives, then it can be nowhere more direct, transparent, and meaningful than at the local (or microregional) level, where there is contact between the people and their proxies, between the 'rulers' and the 'ruled'. The British academic and politician Lord Bryce, who delved deep into the history of local self-governance, observed: "The habit of local self-government is the best training for democratic government in a nation…. the best school of democracy, and the best guarantee for its success is the practice of local self-government."[12]

During the debate in the Constituent Assembly on 5 Nov 1948, some members pointed that "The constitution of a free country should be based on local self-government." We see nothing of local self-government anywhere in this Constitution. Although some very vocal members of the Constituent Assembly batted for it, the vehement opposition by some very prominent members like Ambedkar and Nehru prevailed. Their almost visceral dislike of villages gave us the extreme opposite: a centralized government. This Constitution was drafted as if there were no previous endogenous constitutional precedents. That is not true. The fact of the matter is that "The ancient Indian Political thought is one of the most developed political thought not only in India but all over the World. Unfortunately, this fact

has not been well recognized… The ancient Indian Political Thought and its philosopher's needs reintroduction into the totality of Political thought so that they can claim rightful place in the history of Political thought".[13]

Many voices forcefully argued in favor of the role of village units: "A Constitution which is not based on units, and in the making of which they have no voice, in which there is not even a mention of thousands and lakhs of villages of India and in framing which they have had no hand… well, you can give such a Constitution to the country but I very much doubt whether you would be able to keep it for long. But the natural consequence of centralizing power by law will be that our country which has all along opposed fascism—even today we claim to strongly oppose it—will gradually move towards fascism."[14] The erudite Alladi Krishnaswamy Iyer stated during the Assembly debate that "The Constitution does not give sufficient importance to village communities which are an essential feature of India's social and political life."

Reading the debates in the Assembly on this subject, and the widespread support for the idea of a village-based constitution, the final Constitution looks like a betrayal of the sense of the Assembly. Its ramifications were far wider and more serious than the fate of the village in future India. By turning its back on the villages, the Constitution turned its back on the backbone of Indian civilization and self-governance in every form. That yielded a Constitution that was crippled at birth. Finally, as a kind of face-saving sop, it was relegated to the Directive Principles – Article 40, which reads: "The State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function

as units of self-government." Even after Article 40 was adopted, some members still felt that "a very serious situation was created by not making the village republic or the village unit as the real basis of the Constitution… One member said, "I feel that in the matter of framing the Constitution we have superimposed a Constitution from above and have not made a real effort to start from village life." An amendment was even suggested to the Preamble that "after the word 'Republic', the words 'to be worked on the basis of autonomous village units or groups of villages organized on the principle of self-sufficiency as far as practical' be added."

Seventy-five years after Independence, grassroots governance stands ensconced as a pious hope in the Constitution. Despite the labors of numerous committees headed by Balwantrai Mehta (1957), Ashok Mehta (1977), G.V.K. Rao (1985), L.M. Singhvi (1986), and the path-breaking 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, India effectively has only two levels of government—Union and State. Gandhi's expectation that "When the panchayat raj is established, public opinion will do what violence can never do" has been stillborn. Panchayats in many parts of the county are in dire straits. In some states, panchayat presidents have committed or attempted suicide, unable to pay the debts they incurred in their finance development work.[15] All in all, the Constitution failed to give effect to the basic premise of good governance: "For democratic power to be best exercised it must be vested in a local community and common members and instead of isolated, atomized individuals, at the top of the organization."[16]

One must also note here that while advocating grassroots governance, some members in the Constituent

Assembly pointed out the danger of political power being grabbed by 'village zamindars, village *talukdars*, *mahajans*, and money-lending classes'. That risk exists everywhere. It is no less under the present Constitution: power is grabbed by the plutocracy, rubbing salt into the wounds 'democratically' to boot. A slight variant of grassroots democracy is what the geo-libertarian political economist Fred E. Foldvary termed 'cellular democracy', a model of democracy based on multi-level bottom-up structures in either small neighborhood governmental districts or contractual communities. The version that India betted on after Independence is almost diametrically different. This is also most distressing since India enjoyed, from the earliest dawn of her civilization, a singularly self-sustaining system of local governance. It manifested, in the words of Radhakumud Mookerji, "exuberant vitality and manifold growth of self-governing institutions among a people characterized by a genius for social experiments and constructions."[17] The truth is that India, although politically and administratively fractured, has always been immanently interwoven. It is that cardinal truth that got wearied and worn off, to the point that although politically and administratively India is a 'union of states', its constitutional constituents behave as though they have nothing in common organically. Each one constantly tries to encroach on the other's turf and primary mandate.

Another step back was that while for much of our history, as far back as one could discern, the locus of governance was necessarily local, it is now national. Localism lost its sheen and got identified with regression and repression. Grassroots democracy, or what is called village republics, or village or local government, was

defined by S. Lawal as that tier of government closest to the people, "which is vested with certain powers to exercise control over the affairs of people in its domain."[18] Gandhi had put it this way: "In the true democracy of India, the unit is the village… True democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the center. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village."[19]

One must understand 'village' to be local, which does not exclude urban, town or city. If democracy entails people running their own lives, then it is nowhere more explicit, clear and significant than at the local level, where the contact between the people and their representatives, between the rulers and the ruled, is more constant, consistent, and vigilant. The city-states of classical Greece was grassroots governance in practice, in which the village assembly was the *de facto* government, the policy-making body, elected by lots, not by election. *Demos* or *deme* is the Greek word for 'village'. The *deme* was the smallest administrative unit of the Athenian state, like a voting precinct or school district. Athens was not a republic, nor were the people governed by a representative body of legislators. In a very real sense, the people governed themselves, debating and voting individually on issues great and small. It instills a culture that allows citizens to be confident in their ability to do what was needed and to reach their goals.

The model ignored by our Constitution makers was "neither anarchy nor the unqualified pluralism of discrete and isolated groups without reference to any nexus or solidarity as provided by the state, by dharma, or otherwise."[20] It was a process or system in which every person and community was empowered to be part of decision-making, in ways that are ecologically tenable and

socially equitable. It also entailed localization of economic activity relating to the meeting of basic needs such that clusters of settlements can be relatively self-reliant or self-sufficient, and encouragement of non-monetized or local exchange systems for products and services. Besides the individual and the central political authority, there were a range of intermediate bodies, based on every possible principle of formation, which was the most characteristic feature of the Indian polity through the ages. It proceeds from a moral premise that makes respect for the dignity and responsibility of the individuals of which it is composed, the purpose of every political or social entity. Every institution exists only to help the members of society and not to destroy or absorb them. That is what sovereignty of people is all about, not the way it is misinterpreted, where the state, supposedly deriving its legitimacy from the people, treats them as subjects, beneficiaries, and recipients. What most of us tend to ignore is that a chunk of India's population lives in rural areas and their contact with the Indian state is primarily with a *patwari*, the local village official handling land issues, and higher up in the hierarchy. On law and order, they mostly interact with a beat constable, *havildar* or, at best, an assistant sub-inspector in charge of a *thana*. And that is possible only in a constitutionally empowered bottom rung of the administrative hierarchy. Such a concept has been in India ever since the dawn of civilization in various forms, including that of *sabhas* and the *samitis* at the village level.

A *samiti* was the assembly that in some cases enjoyed the right of electing a king, while the *sabha* exercised some judicial functions. Both the samiti and sabha enjoyed the rights to debate, a privilege unknown to the popular

assemblies of other ancient people. As Rakesh Goyal notes, "It is remarkable to note that for several centuries, the avarice of monarchs, even of the greatest, impacted the sovereign republics only to a limited extent, with not much effect on the internal management of guilds, or religious *sanghas*, or the social life in the villages… The existence of an aggressive warlord in the neighborhood did not pose much of a problem for the republican politics… The spirit of republicanism continued to thrive at the grassroots at village level, which were left undisturbed to their own devices."[21] For all practical purposes the village was a 'mini-state', and what happened anywhere else was not irrelevant but tangential. It was the British who changed it as a part of colonial governance.

Colonialism was not merely a physical suppression of people, but also caused desecration of indigenous culture on the one hand, and psychological subjugation on the other hand, of the people who became emotionally laidback and intellectually lackluster. As Rakesh Sinha pointed out, "This is the reason why imperialism has not only drained the wealth but also consciously ruined the culture and changed the demographic character of the space it encroached."[22] As Ashis Nandy explains, "As we got more and more impoverished under the British, the older ways established in the days of plenty just vanished. The whole society went into a withdrawal and survival mode… Once the British came, the extraction became very rampant, the old taxation structures were replaced with very extractive processes… Many communities like the craftsmen, *devadasis*, musicians, artisans, teachers and purohits who were not from the agricultural community but who were supported by the local economies were impoverished.

Many of them went over to the British side and became the lower bureaucracy and the police force… The more affluent and educated joined the system as engineers, doctors, and lawyers, and became part of the oppressing system."[23] The class of people (we should add administrators too) whom Frantz Fanon called the 'national bourgeoisie'.[24]

A case for grassroots governance

Only through grassroots governance can sustainable development occur where it is needed most. Only in grassroots governance is it possible to avoid conflict between special representation of special interests with the well-being of the weakest. It also facilitates two important concepts: popular participation and 'deliberative democracy', which adopts elements of both consensus decision-making and majority rule. Consensus and consultation are essential at all levels but are best implemented through local governance. That was also what our scriptures exhorted us. The world's oldest scripture, the *Rig Veda*, for example, tells us: "Come together, talk together, Let our minds be in harmony. Common be our prayer, Common be our end, Common be our purpose, Common be our deliberations, Common be our desires, United be our hearts, United be our intentions, Perfect be the union among us."[25] It differs from traditional democratic theory in that authentic deliberation, not mere voting, is the primary source of legitimacy for the law. It is perhaps the only way to loosen the stranglehold of politics and political parties on democracy and counter their crippling influence. This is the only channel for people to participate in politics, which Joyce Mitchell defines as 'collective decision-making or policy-making common to

the whole society'.[26] This is how ordinary people can 'decide for what, for whom and how [they] provide, manage and collectively own resources and public services'. The poor, more than any other group, rely on basic public services. That will also be a titanic step towards 'democratizing economic governance' and aligning social priorities to the real needs of real people. This the only level where a role in politics becomes a part that every member of the society has to play, and politics itself becomes a matter that affects all of us. The basic premise is that for a decision in a true democracy to be licit, decision-making must be predated by distilled deliberation, not merely the aggregation of options that occurs in voting. In a devolved system of governance, local government is perceived as a separate and distinct level over which central authority has little or no direct control. Local government enables people to 'live together' rather than 'live near each other'.

The takeaway point is that the representative body closest to the people must be empowered to be responsible for all that a citizen needs for a hassle-free daily life, whether it is a new electricity supply connection, or a sewage disposal issue, or the issue of a birth/death certificate, or if a citizen simply needs to file a complaint with the police without fear. It is such routine but necessary things that matter to free the mind of worries. Such a representative body should be constitutionally bestowed with the necessary and adequate political, administrative, and financial powers including taxation. What can constitute a viable and vibrant 'self-governing village community' needs careful consideration. At present, there is no single, nationally-suitable unit that could fit the purpose. Districts, even *tahsils* or *mandals*, are highly uneven, some very large in some states, and some

very small in other states. A parliamentary or assembly constituency can also be considered, which could be more uniform across the country. With a smaller population, one can have a more manageable bureaucracy, a more responsive democracy, and one can better preserve indigenous cultures, societal structures, and retain the ethos of 'cooperative collective existence'. It is not entirely a coincidence that small nations in the world are some of the happiest, secure, and peaceful nations in the world.

The need for self-sufficient self-governance at the lowest operational level can be underscored from another perspective. While injustice, oppression, and misuse of power take place everywhere, it is most acute in the hinterland of India, which accounts for 70% of the country's population. It is here that even a petty official can be most vicious, and can do either tremendous good or terrible bad. The test of all governance is here. It is here that the most acute injustice occurs, both administrative and judicial. It is here that there is the greatest scope and opportunity to render effective social justice, including 'distributive justice'—fair distribution of resources among those who are in need of it—because at this level, everything becomes both proximate and personal. The bedrock of grassroots governance is the principle of subsidiarity which translates as what can best be done at the lower levels of government should not be centralized at higher levels.

The key is local empowerment through grassroots mobilization and the development of community-based forms of popular democracy. It represents both a goal of social change and a method of bringing about change; indeed, that is the only way. It is the right locus to introduce a model of growth equity that steers away from models that

have both failed: centrally planned socialism and market-driven capitalism. It is a path towards creating citizen-centric structures and services and empowerment of the majority who lack power. What is staggeringly strange is that while the public space is filled with talk of majority arrogance and minority marginalization, it is the deconstruction of the notion of public space and the practice of public service that ought to be of equal, if not greater concern. We need concerted efforts towards economic inclusion, integration, and empowerment. The economic majority are the poor, who do not derive commensurate benefits from the much-heralded India's growth story. The poor remain well below the upper crust, and do not receive the privileges and perks of the political majority in a democracy; they do not have even the religious or ethnic 'minority rights'. It is the economic minority in numbers that monopolizes power and its perks.

While 'other' minorities protest and agitate for their rights and entitlements, the down-and-out 'economic majority' stays mute and morose. They do not stage *dharnas* or demonstrations; nor do they attract electoral leverage. Because the poor themselves do not consider that society has any obligation to lift them out; how can that then be a grievance or even a moral claim?! Another reason is that it is implicitly accepted that economy comes before lives. That is why the lethal winter smog in Delhi comes by year after year and no one is held to account politically. The wretched of India languish, suffer and simply struggle each day just to wake up the next day, able enough to get off whatever goes as a bed.

To ameliorate the lives of the poor and disadvantaged it requires policies and plans rooted in the ground reality,

and that is possible solely through proximate power and context-specific solutions. This should not be seen solely as a medium to decongest the functions of government from one center to various parts of a country or state, and to provide proximate government services and facilities to every nook and corner of a country. Many of them do not have the power to employ their staff, cannot approve their budgets, cannot approve a certain level of expenditure, and may not be entrenched in the Constitution. They end up being an arrangement of parliament for decongesting central government functions. In this case, they do not behave differently from field agencies, which have very limited controls or resources, and virtually all major initiatives have to be referred to headquarters.

Focus on the local is also the right model of economic growth and development. In this model, the changes people need are produced by them. Such enterprises by the people and for the people, using local resources and local energies, are more sustainable than top-down, large-scale programs. Such an approach would be more inclusive and facilitates development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Further, local bodies provide the soundest basis for a successful working democracy. People who are accustomed to managing their local affairs without any interference from any quarter, will not allow the establishment of dictatorship. They are very particular about their autonomy and liberty. They will go to any extent to resist any encroachment on this. The foundation of democracy is very weak in a country in which the local bodies do not enjoy a large measure of autonomy and are not allowed to manage their affairs in their own way.

Autonomy for ground-level decision-making

Indeed, the most potent obstacle to the long-term strength and stability of India today, is the way of national decision-making. We need a new ambience and ecosystem that allows our diversity to dominate decision determination. It is not a matter of tools or technique, intentions or inputs. The nimblest of minds and the noblest of leaders cannot do it right. It cannot but be flawed and warped. It is simply that it should not be solely, or even principally, national at all. National should be residual, that which cannot be performed elsewhere closer to the local level. In a land as disparate and varied as India, few things are of equal value or obligatory; the basic needs may be the same but priorities differ from place to place and from time to time.

With everything in India getting 'politicized', distributive decisions of any kind or weight will be the prime target of political pressure. For every decision taken in any democracy, much more so in what is being called a 'patronage-democracy' like India's, it also means another decision is not taken, and that has a political fallout. There is always a risk that local power, like all power, can be misused but that can be checked more easily at the local level than centrally. The greater risk is centralized governance and leadership, however charismatic and enlightened it might be.

In India, local leadership is not nurtured unlike, say, in China. Its official policy is to "select officials based on integrity and ability and on the basis of merit regardless of background to cultivate more talented individuals."[27] While selecting officials, it places a premium on those who have 'grassroots working experience, those who dare to take on responsibilities, and those who are adept at taking

action'. While granting that that is a possible 'advantage' of a fascist state, that *advantage* could still make a difference, at least in the short term vis-a-vis India.

Ground-level accent creates a platform for citizens with different skills—the melodious musician, the brave sepoy, the magical weaver, the mesmerizing story-teller, the pious preacher, the fortune-telling astrologer, the other-worldly ascetic—to exchange or complement each other's abilities and cohabit in the mutual embrace of a communal life. That is the only way to meet the truest test of any policy, the extent of benefit received by the 'last man standing in the last line of the social strata' and to go anywhere near Gandhian dictum about 'wiping every tear from every eye', and ease the anguish of the agonized. The result is that governance as a whole becomes more sensitive and responsive to ground realities, and its policies more consensual and implementable. Otherwise, there is bound to be a procrustean tendency in everything that the union government does, blurring the vast diversity of the country, and attract opposition and encourage special interest groups.

And then again, functional autonomy is a sham without financial autonomy. It is only a combination of the two that enables local power-wielders to be policy-makers and pacesetters in their relatively small domains. Only then will the elected local leadership have the freedom and power to employ and deploy their own staff and to deal with all personnel matters concerning recruitment, promotions and demotions, discipline, remuneration, etc. It is only such constitutionally empowered 'autonomy'—not someone else's goodwill and good sense—that will facilitate translation of universalizing policies into specific decisions

in the context of the infinitely variable contexts of everyday life. It is only at the operational level that one of the pullbacks on India's forward march—notorious inordinate delays and bureaucratic bottlenecks—can be eliminated; no amount of wailing, reforms, or upbraiding of officers will do. It is ironic that the same states which advocate fiercely for federalism and decentralization in their dealings with the center, shy away from further devolution of power and the establishment of the local political marketplace. It is astonishing that this was foreseen while drafting the Constitution itself. One member said, "The provinces which complain that the center has been made too strong and that certain powers have been taken away from them, have themselves in the intoxication of power taken away the powers of the local bodies."[28]

Further, past experience suggests that creating structures of elected local governments and merely ensuring regular elections does not guarantee effective local empowerment. That is primarily because the Constitution left the issue of degree of empowerment and devolution to the State Legislature, as local government is a state subject in the Constitution. Under Article 243G, state legislatures should endow these institutions 'with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government'. State Governments are not always in favor to effectively empower local governments, because they view it as diminishing of their power and control. In India, another drawback to local self-governance is the absence of financial autonomy; local bodies like panchayats and municipalities and corporations lack the funding and the legal power to raise resources commensurate with their responsibilities. They

are now heavily dependent on aid from the center and state governments. The provision of civic amenities falls short of expectations due to inadequacy of funds. Hence the local governments have to stay at the mercy of their state government for allocation of funds through grants to meet their needs including salaries of the staff. This goes for municipalities and corporations too. One reason every monsoon submerges cities is poor maintenance and the reason partly is lack of adequate funds.

It is human nature to behave more reasonably, responsively, and responsibly in situations of immediacy, closeness, intimacy, and familiarity. Distance might make hearts grow fonder, and familiarity might breed contempt, but for governance, the proximity of people forces the government to fear the wrath of the people constantly. The configuration of the present-day constitutional governance is the inverse of this pivotal democratic principle. For example, India's deployment of human and financial resources to what we may call developmental 'ground-zero' is shockingly less than that of China, and of course of the USA. According to Devesh Kapur, "The share of local government employees in total employment in the USA or China is five times that of India… Local government expenditure is 3% of the total government expenditure in India, compared with 27% in the USA and 51% in China".[29]

What is especially deplorable is that this is also the inverse of the praxis and practice of our days of yore which was characterized thus: "…cooperative self-government often produced republicanism and even democracy comparable to classical Greek democracy".[30] There is tenable evidence also from Arrian's *Anabasis of Alexander*, which describes the Macedonian conqueror's campaigns

in great detail. It describes "eyewitness accounts of Alexander's companions and describes him coming across free and independent Indian communities at every turn."[31] Furthermore, "Greek writers writing about the exploits of Alexander refer to a people who practiced a democratic form of government but were not monarchical, though their sway encompassed a large area… This indicates that Indian republics of late 4th century BCE were much larger than the Greek city-states of that time. It seems that republicanism was at that time the standard practice in the north-western part of India signifying almost half of the Indian subcontinent. Alexander's historians refer to a handful of kings, but they are lavish in their praise of a large number of republics; some of them are named, while some are not."[32]

What is required is constitutional, political, and economic 'autonomy' at every level. With newer classes emerging to stake their claim on the pie of political power, the situation has become more problematic. Everyone must have the powers and resources necessary—no more and no less—to discharge their duties and responsibilities. It is not decentralization that we need; it is a more balanced devolution of powers between all elected bodies, weighted in terms of their proximity to the people. Under devolution, local bodies like panchayats are 'government at that level', not subordinate or superior to anyone else. Local governments that enjoy devolution are likely to exhibit the following characteristics: their existence is constitutionally guaranteed; they also have the constitutional backing to perform certain statutory functions, to exercise power or control over policies; the councils are democratically constituted and therefore accountable to the people (i.e.,

the people become a primary source of power). In a direct democracy scenario, larger-level governance structures need to emanate from the locally empowered decision-making units. These are envisaged as clusters or federations of villages and towns with common ecological features, larger landscape-level institutions, and others that in some way also relate to existing administrative and political units of districts and states. What Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous French political philosopher and historian, wrote about decentralization applies equally: "Decentralization has not only an administrative value, but also a civic dimension, since it increases the opportunities for citizens to take interest in public affairs; it makes them get accustomed to using freedom."[33]

Need for a new playbook for good governance

Our governance is distant, trickle-down; topsy-turvy; development programs do not reflect the disparity of the needs of the nation, stemming largely from the diversity of its people. Even our 'leadership' is top-heavy; we need to nurture local leadership. What we forget is that diversity goes hand in hand with shared history, values, traditions, and culture. Preserving and managing religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity is essential to promote stability and integration in the state, but that is one of our most notable shortcomings. We have become impatient with differences and embittered with plurality, because that requires willingness to cede some of our mental space. What we forget is that these two are at the heart of creation. As the theosophist Annie Besant explained: "Differences are thus necessary for our conditioned consciousness. We think

by differences, we feel by differences, and we know by differences. It is only by differences that we know that we are living and thinking men. Unity makes on consciousness no impression. Differences and diversities—those are the things which make the growth of consciousness possible. The unconditioned consciousness is beyond our thinking."[34] Instead, the compulsions of our way of democracy have made differences and diversities a divisive and discordant force. The problem is that some of those who complain about divisiveness are implicitly signaling how much they dislike the people on the other side, because if it weren't for them, there wouldn't be divisiveness. Those who contribute to divisiveness and those who complain about are both complicit in furthering divisiveness. We have to handle divisiveness while bearing in mind that democracy needs divisions and heat without hate, and real disagreements A major challenge before Indian democracy has to be to bring both—the need to treasure diversity and the need to curb divisiveness—in consonance with each other.

Such a line of thought and hypothesis is getting global attention as a way to 'helping humankind lead an affluent and happy life.'[35] It reflects the growing concern that the benefits of an enlarged economic pie brought about by economic growth are not filtering down to intended individuals in the form of increased living standards, employment, and incomes. Its interest also lies in whether or not ordinary citizens are allowed to partake in the process of development of their own accord, in tune with their specific social, cultural, economic, and ecological setting. It empowers them to define their own concept of development, and to decide which need is more important than others and needs to be done or dealt with first. A

prerequisite is to ensure that constitutional political power vests in the hands of a cross-section of people that is truly representative of the character and plurality of the populace. And that is the only way 'people-power' can become pro-poor and responsive to the lives of the 'most needy'.

Grassroots governance is also increasingly has come to be seen as the ideal instrument of equitable justice by emphasizing local ownership, fair distribution of the developmental resources, and practical manifest of sovereignty of the people. In a key report, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) made people-centered development a target policy for all member countries. It stressed the importance of local ownership, participation, and capacity building while attaining economic growth.[36] The OECD also noted that "democratic processes are essential to people-centered development because they allow communities to create their own development goals and influence the decisions that determine their quality of life."[37] This strategy "emphasizes the need for local ownership so that communities have responsibility and control over their resources in order to benefit themselves and also stresses the role of government as an enabler for the peoples' agenda."[38] It recognizes that economic growth does not inherently contribute to human development and calls for changes in social, political, and environmental values and practices. Because of this, there are potentially thousands of pathways to development. The people of India must become partners and participants in such a shift, not be content to be onlookers, observers, and recipients.

What India needs to put in place, is a playbook for a Second Republic with a brand-new Constitution and a new electoral paradigm and political and economic power-

spread. The simple point is that approximation makes possible the three 'Ps' necessary for good governance—*power* to be responsible; *prioritization* to become meaningful; and *protest* to be effective. That also encourages local or on-the-spot innovation.

The clarion call is loud and clear: India must make a slew of 'break-out' or mid-course corrections—in its governing philosophy, constitutional configuration, economic ideology, social norms—to get back on to the right road and regain the lost momentum. At the heart of it is the fact that, in the words of Lee Kuan Yew (the legendary founding father of modern Singapore and a keen observer of India), "There are limitations in the Indian constitutional system and the Indian political system that prevent it from going at high speed…"[39] As Yew puts it, "Whatever the political leadership may want to do, it must go through a very complex system at the center, and then even a more complex system in the various states."[40] The ugly reality is that after over seventy years of its working, the Westminster style of governance in India has very little, if any, say of the represented in our representative government, and the 'representatives' have become rulers. Representing all or even a sizable proportion is a logical impossibility; no representative, however high-minded or intelligent, can think, deliberate, negotiate or vote as if he or she were several hundred thousand people. This is not relevant to India alone. Even in the most enduring democracy in the world, the USA, some perceptive observers are arguing that 'congress is not doing the job it was established to do', and that sortition is a better way to choose its members, particularly in the House of Representatives. And that "It avoids vexing problems posed by geographic notions

of representation. And it gives promise of lasting redress against abuses of the electoral process that are chronic in a society dominated by money."[41]

The seminal question of this moment is how to initiate and orchestrate such a convulsive and inherently unsettling process in a society that is so smug and self-righteous, and that is in a state of such fracture and fury. Normally, in any disciplined democracy, the political class, the so-called proxies of the people, should be on the frontline of systemic transformation. But the political class in India is the chief beneficiary of the *status quo*, and cannot be trusted to spearhead any kind of radical shift in gears. The Anglicized gentry and the affluent benefit the most, and are also the main obstacle to what needs to change. The middle class—about 432 million—is entirely self-centered and self-righteous, and are being pampered by the political class. One cannot do better than Sri Aurobindo to describe a member of this class as "A man of facile sentiments and skin-deep personality; generally 'enlightened' but not inconveniently illuminated. In love with his life, his ease and above all things his comforts, he prescribes the secure maintenance of these precious possessions as the first indispensable condition of all action in politics and society; whatever tends to disturb or destroy them, he condemns as foolish, harebrained, dangerous or fanatical, according to the degree of its intensity and is ready to repress by any means in his power."[42] It is this insatiably gluttonous man who is the mover and shaker in India. But it was not always so. As Sri Aurobindo says, "That a society which had only a few decades ago prostrated itself before the naked ascetic and the penniless Brahmin, should now wear the monied man and the official as the tilak on its forehead, was indeed

a marvellous revolution."[43] Sri Aurobindo sums up thus, "For good or for evil the middle class now leads in India, and whatever saving impulse comes to the nation, must come from the middle class, whatever upward movement begins, it must initiate and lead. But for that to happen the middle class must by a miracle be transfigured and lifted above itself."[44] It is amazing he wrote this in 1907. How true it is even today!

There is little choice. Today's 'spoiled brat' has to be tomorrow's trailblazer. He/she must become less self-centered and more socially sensitive; less comfort-driven and more sharing and giving. The young of India are either immersed in fighting their way through the charade that goes by the name of education, or are trying to beat the daunting odds of getting a job, or figuring out how and where to escape abroad. We must understand that without the participation, passive or positive, of some among us, nothing of any significance, good or bad, can happen. If we want to be proud of India's headway, we shouldn't flinch from taking responsibility for the headwinds also.

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Growth Built Around the Lives of the 'Most needy'

One of the most critical and crucial decisions that India needs to take, which could affect everything and everyone in the country, concerns the economic dimension—how to marshal and harmonize our realities, resources, constraints, longings, needs, goals, and priorities.

What kind of collectivity and connectedness will we want and towards what end? What kind of paradigms, policies, programs, and management will be required to that end? How do we balance competing and compelling claims, demands and priorities without compromising the common good and national interest? What should be the direction of all state-sponsored and aided economic activity? Who should be the primary focus, the target audience, without benefiting whom everything else would be meaningless? What kind of desires and wishes of its citizens should the state strive to fulfil? What about our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the future citizens of India? Will they be born into a world as different from ours as ours is from the world in which our ancestors lived eons ago?

The picture today

While looking ahead about what has to be done on the economic front, we must ungrudgingly acknowledge the great strides made by the nation, especially in the last decade, and particularly on the basic needs front. However, mere availability and access are not good enough; it is the quality of our immediate environment that matters: the quality of air, food, water, shelter, sanitation, etc. We need new parameters and standards to monitor and measure the

'goodness' of living spaces. The country needs to aim higher to make India a great society. We must be equally ready to acknowledge that we are not where we should have been, even in relation with other countries, not only with China. Looking ahead, we should also keep a historical perspective that gives us self-belief. Not only in ancient times, but even until the eighteenth century, India "was a far greater industrial and manufacturing nation than any in Europe than any other in Asia."[45] Even more remarkable, something that stands in stark contrast to contemporary India, is woven around what German historian Frederick Schlegel described as the "holy tendency of so many Indian laws, customs, and manners, and the severe and serious simplicity of their entire life."[46] Post-independent India's growth and developmental counterpart has been primarily economic, not holistic, and devoid of any moral or spiritual basis. And unlike its antique antecedents, it has become a virtual captive of the political architecture stemming from our convoluted Constitution.

About our Constitution, what escapes attention are its economic deficiencies. During the Constituent Assembly debates, one member pointedly said, "I feel, as for the economic side, the Draft Constitution is almost silent. It is rather anxious to safeguard the sanctity of property; it is rather anxious to safeguard the rights of those who have got something and it is silent about those who are dispossessed and who have got nothing. While there is much about the sanctity of property and the inviolability of property, things such as right to work, right to means of livelihood and right to leisure, etc., have been left out and these things should have been effectively incorporated, in the Constitution."[47] Another member said, "The Draft Constitution has gone

in a wrong direction and it requires amendment very badly… the same capitalistic monetary system is adopted here."[48] India's development prototype—the neoclassical economics copied from the West—is based on the idea that humans are driven (almost) exclusively by 'selfishness', and puts a premium on completion, not cooperation. The kind of society this model gave us can be well described by the following words: "The commercialization and privatization of public services and the commodification of all aspects of life have driven growing inequalities and entrenched power disparities, giving prominence to profit and corruption over people's rights and ecological and social well-being."[49] Economic power had no autonomous existence save as political patronage. Those who were supposed to be benefited by development had nothing to do with how, when and in what way that benefit was designed and delivered. Despite successive governments of all hues and stripes, this has not conceptually changed. With India's development prototype essentially following the same model for over 76 years—License-Raj or liberalization, Nehruvian 'closed' economy or Narasimha Rao's 'open' economy—what kind of society has India become? What kind of India is it as the world's fifth-largest economy by nominal GDP and the third-largest by purchasing power parity (PPP)?

Already, India's GDP is higher than that of France, but that is misleading. The fact is that even after having a bigger economy, India is miles behind France in every measure of well-being of its people. India's GDP per capita is estimated currently at 4.6% of France's GDP per capita.[50] India aims to be a $5-trillion economy by 2025. How will it reflect on the daily lives of the bottom quarter of its

population? What good is "how big the economy" if nearly a billion people of the country cannot, according to FAO, afford a healthy diet?[51]

This paradox offers us a window to one of the most prickly issues. Have we got on to the wrong road by choosing GDP-centricity as the path for our salvation? Are we compounding the problem by single-mindedly trying to be a 'developed country', and making it our pre-eminent centenary goal for 2047? We have now come to accept the term 'developed' as is often implied in the Western world as a final stage within the developmental process. That is why our all-consuming aspiration is to be a 'developed country', not a *dharmic* country. Such a solemn desire and abiding aspiration at this time tells a lot about how mentally mediocre and West-imitative we are even in our dreams. First, we should fully take note of what kind of society that will make us, and also look at what growing discontent in many of these 'developed' countries has turned them into. Second, this too amounts to a top-down and trickle-down economic model, which we need to move away from, to make room for one that comes close to the Bhutanese concept of 'gross national happiness', not GDP.

Before aiming to be such a country, we should have visualized what kind of society it would result in. We should have envisioned and arrived at a 'common vision' of that society; it is hard to believe, but we have not done so. Firstly, there is no single prototype among the extant developed countries; they differ widely—Scandinavian or European or American or Japanese—the only common thread being high per-capita income. On that count, we are way behind many developing countries. The fact is that quantitatively it is a huge climb, and qualitatively quite scary. The average

GDP per capita for OECD member countries for 2022, was $43,261. India's was $2,257 for the year 2021. Qualitatively, how Indian society might well be can be guessed from one depiction: "A society that is economically affluent due to increasingly widespread access to a variety of luxury consumer goods. Luxury consumer goods are goods that are not need-based such as food, water, and shelter; rather, consumption of luxury goods is driven by consumer desire for luxury or affluence and largely based on influence from advertising and product marketing."[52] Would that be what we would like to be? Even if (which is a huge if, given India's diversity) certain parts and some sections come close to being more prosperous with better infrastructure (while the rest remain far behind), India will continue to be morally malevolent and riven with more intolerable economic and social inequalities and inequities. The ultra-rich of India could further shrink the gap between their lives and those of their 'cousins' in the West. And the upper middle class will become pale imitations of the rich. For the archetypal common man, much less the poor, will the news that India is now the fastest growing major economy in the world be something to crow about? Are the fruits of such growth being partaken fairly, justly, and justifiably?

There can be no cut-and-dried, off-the-peg kind of answers anywhere; it is simplistic, even silly, to expect them in India. Across-the-board distributive justice has become a mirage, prompting calls for retributive justice. Troublesome but telling is that we haven't even tried to evolve more germane yardsticks and touchstones. But what is certain is that what they hide are as important as what they signify. On the one hand, they point to all-round prosperity, but they also validate the growing disparity between the haves

and have-nots, and even within the have-nots. It has given rise, for instance, to two kinds of pot-bellies: one overfed, the other malnourished.

The GDP has acquired such an iconic acceptance as a measure of a nation's economic might and meaning that it is useful to note that GDP is a specialized tool, designed to measure only a narrow segment of a society's activity. Treating it as an indicator of general economic well-being is misleading and distracting. When it was developed post-World War II and legitimized at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, it served a pivotal purpose stemming from that particular, even peculiar, context. The global geo-economic scenario is dramatically different now, aided by ever-accelerating technological change. What is interesting is that way back in 1976, American author Edward Abbey described the growth-at-any-cost model as the 'ideology of the cancer cell'. Sometime thereafter, Simon Kuznets, Nobel economist and developer of the GDP, warned against misconstruing it as a welfare measure. Economist Joseph Stiglitz cautioned about the 'fetishization of the GDP'. It is neither useless nor to be thrown into the dustbin yet, but needs to be properly winnowed and balanced; it cannot be the dominant criteria any more. That can distract national policy-making. In many ways, it encourages activities that are counter to long-term community well-being. Studies have shown that increases in GDP are offset by the costs associated with adverse factors like increasing income inequality, and natural capital depletion.[53]

In our obsession for GDP growth, we have failed to see the downside. With every percentage increase in GDP, the capacity to generate jobs has systematically declined. Applying just one litmus test for 'Brand India' or for being

'truly Indian', by way of ethnicity or religion or language, will almost certainly be our undoing. The essence of India has always been territorial and civilizational; it cannot be appropriated or even approximated by any single factor. Then again, GDP per se is not purchasing power, nor is economic growth always synonymous with improved quality of life. As someone said, it measures everything, including pollution and cigarette advertising, except that which makes life worthwhile. We need to develop metrics and indicators that promote development that improves the quality of human life of the poorest and weakest, while living within the carrying capacity of the supporting ecosystems. According to one extrapolation, if India were to become economically like the industrialized parts of the world like North America, Western Europe or East Asia, India's GDP should be $87 trillion, about the same as the entire world economy in 2020. India becoming a mirror image of the West will be disastrous for India and the world, something Gandhi warned against not long ago. He said that if India adopted such a lifestyle, the earth would be barren in a few decades. It now appears abundantly evident that "India's great failure has been the inability to model development along the lines of her own civilization, in keeping with her own dharma, and building on the incomparable foundations of her own culture, laid down in the forests of dawn by the seer-poets, the rishis."[54]

Our relentless rebuke and reengineering of nature, in a culture that once equated divinity with nature, is a clear rupture from our moral motivations. The lifestyle that we are pursuing is already leaving its foul footprints. From an allied perspective, "The growth of GDP is like a disease. It kills the economy's natural and social hosts. Natural

resources are converted into commodities to feed the economic machine. Nature is reengineered for economic growth—more dams, more roads, and even more tourists in the Himalayas."[55] It has led to the transfer of publicly-owned resources into private hands at a pittance, and the emergence of India's own brand of rent-seekers and robber barons. It is such a model that economically empowers some of us to indulge the way we do—scout and shop all over the world to discard our surplus money to acquire the rarest and most expensive things, and dine in the most expensive restaurants, such as *Sublimotion* (in Spain),[56] while economically impoverishing millions, whose roof at night is the sky, and who scavenge the garbage to pluck things they can eat to fill their bellies.

That very model reflects the internalized attitude of ethno-inferiority as a result of five to six generations of Indians living as subjects under foreign masters, who systematically made us believe in our own inferiority to perpetuate their rule. This became so ingrained in us that even our policy-makers were aware of its pitfalls but were paralyzed to do anything. All the religions that originated in India talk of human growth first. They also spoke of economic growth, but made it clear that economic growth without dharma or any kind of restraint would be destructive. One of the most alarming trends in India's recent growth trajectory is the steady "decline in the number of jobs being created with every percentage growth in GDP."[57] That it is not serendipitous or random is evident by the fact that this has been consistent since the 1980s.[58]

What is becoming more and more obvious is that the current configuration of political and economic power is leading to disempowerment, dispossession, displacement,

and despair of a sizeable section of citizens of this country. The privileged and the smug upper middle class and upper castes—which has emerged as a powerful political pressure point—can argue that this kind of inequity and injustice is the bitter pill to swallow, if a leviathan like India has to make up for centuries of development default, and try to economically leapfrog and break out of the vicious cycle in which it is trapped. While granting that some pain and sacrifice is inescapable, it has to be fair, reasonable, proportionate and consistent with the 'capacity to bear'.

Obsession with the GDP is another face of 'perpetual progress', dubbed as 'one of the most genocidal words in history'.[59] Just as progress is more than simply change, it must be progress with a moral purpose. So is it with the GDP; it must contribute to social progress. The way to make it happen is to make the place of real action *local*, and make the whole process participatory of the intended beneficiary. In India today, the scenario continues to be the same: someone sitting far away with some other purpose in mind decides in utter isolation in what shape and in what way public money is to be channeled and spent for the supposed benefit of others somewhere else. The same goes for youth schemes with the same result. Tolstoy saw it as spiritual decay.

This was contrary to our own yesteryear's tradition and thought. In that praxis, human 'progress' was more than physical or material progress; it was equally moral and spiritual. Indeed, there was then symbiosis, not dichotomy. Kautilya's *Yogakshema* (theory of good governance) envisioned holistic development (material as well as spiritual) of the society as well as that of the individual. It took into account the well-being of the poorest of the poor.

It even said that 'the end is economic governance, while political governance is the means'.

One of the all-too-visible downsides of India's post-Independence growth model is the rising and glaring unevenness of wealth, income, and living standards. India's richest 1% hold more than four-times the wealth held by 953 million people who make up for the bottom 70% of the country's population.[60] Someone called them the 'other IAS'—Indo-Anglicans—who are being dubbed as India's 'newest and fastest-growing caste'.[61] The ugly truth is that "we condemn the caste system of our country, but we ignore the fact that we, who have received Western education, constitute a caste more exclusively and intolerantly than any of the traditional castes."[62] Our society is anchored on what Ambedkar called 'graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others'.[63] The real and rude inequality is not between the billionaires and wage-earners but between the two worlds that are wide apart: one inhabited by the 'New Class'—the rich, upper crust, and upper middle class—and the 'low class'. Excluding the 'first', the so-called high net-worth individuals, the rest are faceless and mingle among us, and number in tens of millions. Some among the 'second' are the worst of the rest. What distinguishes them quite simply is this: for whatever reason, their bodies and mind get to be denied, deprived, and disempowered of what any human normally needs in order to lead a wholesome human life. While how many they are is debatable, they are a big slice of the people of India.

Another disturbing symbol of India's ugly economic asymmetry is how the moneyed and elite insulate themselves from the rest. The rich have built what Anand Neelakantan

calls 'independent island republics', virtually insulated from most of what makes living in India so miserable to the common man—problems of water and power supply, sanitation, public health, public schooling. The outcome is that "affluent India is an archipelago of islands where people pay a premium not for quality but for the invisibility of Other Indians. The best thing money can buy in India is keeping India out."[64] "Millions [of Indians] have opted out after internalizing the incapacity of the state to deliver [the most basic of services],"[65] a sort of economic freedom. The only way to improve the 'ease of living' of an ordinary citizen is to minimize the need for administrative interfacing, and make sure that every governmental action should only aim, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, to "restrain men from injuring one another", but "leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits."

Even if one can say that such a vision is impractical, the reality is that sheer 'survival' in India—save for the powerful, privileged, well-pedigreed, and wealthy—remains a debilitating drudgery, a vertiginous nightmare, and an obstacle race, all rolled into one. That leaves little leverage or leeway for any original thought, or breakthrough research and daring creativity, academic and artistic excellence, or any serious scientific and spiritual pursuit. One can quibble with ratings, percentages, figures, and estimates, or question the motives of its critics, but the central takeaway is loud and clear: India is slipping on every index where the quality of human life matters, and clearly, India still has a serious hunger problem after over 75 years of life as a free nation. One can say that the number and intensity is mitigated, but it is still there, and it impairs and ravages many lives. The very meaning of morality changes, both for the hungry and

the rest, in opposite ways: it makes it marginal to the first, and for the second it is a moral indictment.

The late Dalit economist M. Kunhaman, in his autobiography *Ethiru*, says that he went to school "for food and not for education." Kunhaman won a gold medal for securing the first rank in MA in economics, but he sold the medal a few days later to buy food for his family.[66] Some, in extreme situations, end up selling their body parts like kidneys, and some sell sex. In today's age and world, one can place them under the moral cover of *apadh-dharma*, which says that when one is faced with a calamitous situation, traditional norms of dharma or morality do not apply. To illustrate this point, the *Manusmriti* quotes the classic example of Sage Vishwamitra being compelled, during a severe famine, to consume the flesh of a dog after stealing it from the house of a low-caste person. According to the *Global Hunger Index* 2023, India has the highest rate of child wasting in the world with 18.7% of the surveyed children facing malnutrition. Child wasting refers to a child who is too thin for his or her height, and is the result of rapid weight loss or the failure to gain weight. The country's child wasting rate is higher than that of conflict-ridden Yemen (14.4%) and of Sudan (13.7%). China, which we think of as being our competitor, is one of the top 17 nations which are not assigned an individual score because there is little hunger there.

For now, perhaps the best parody of what development has come to be was how Dalai Lama summed it up: "People are created to be loved. Things are created to be used. Instead, our way of life uses people and loves things." Our 'love of things'—appliances, contraptions, gadgets, and gizmos—has taken a life of its own. The two watchwords are *abundance* and *enhancement*. Everything we want is in

plenty, and every faculty we have we want to enhance to make life easy and effortless, comfy and cozy.

We must focus on what—although it is almost impossible to quantify or calibrate with any degree of precision—needs to be done to make India a healthy and happy place to live in, and do what is needed in terms of policies, priorities, and programs. A healthy and happy and a more secure polity will be a huge economic asset, a game-changer in every way.

Need for a new category of the 'most-needy'

We need a new locus and focus, a new way of pin-pointing and separating those sections of citizenry who need, deserve, and require sustained disproportionate policy attention and public resources. For that we must create a new matrix and compass of India's 'growth story', with a focus on health and happiness of the lowest of its local citizens, the necessities of the most wretched, who come closest to those whom Swami Vivekananda called '*Daridra-Narayana*', a description later adopted by Gandhi.

While conceptualizing the 'most needy' variable, it would be highly incumbent to take into full account John Rawls's 'difference principle': "All differences in wealth and income, all social and economic inequalities, should work for the good of the least favored."[67] It states that the long-run expectations of the most disadvantaged—those at the bottom of the economic ladder—should be maximized, subject to the requirement of the most extensive civil liberties for all. In other words, while favoring the least fortunate and most oppressed, it should not be so unfair as to antagonize the rest of the local community.

Swami Vivekananda implied that one should treat service of the poor as equivalent to worshipping God. The idea was that cultivating the habit of seeing divinity in the form of the lowest in the economic and social hierarchy will make it easier to overcome the callous indifference that is at the root of their plight. At issue is who or what kind of citizens of India can justifiably claim and require the most targeted and substantial and sustained active state intervention and help. Whichever way it is codified, it must give due weight to historical discrimination and disempowerment on the basis of caste. But that should not be politicized, which would defeat the very purpose. In one place, most of the 'most needy' may lack enough purchasing power to buy food, while in another place, they may need a roof over the head or access to basic health.

Similarly, the composition of who comes under the purview of 'most needy' can be different. That can cut across history, religion, caste, class, and any other form of identity or divide. For instance, a migrant worker in Mumbai may not be the 'most needy' in his native village. We must draw a distinction from what we might term 'needs applicable to all' and the 'needs of the most needy', applying the laser-like logic of extreme 'deservingness'. That logic fails when we look at another staggering statistic. About 80 crore people, that is, two in every three persons, now depend on the government for food aid—5 kg wheat and 4 kg rice per month. Do they 'deserve' it or take it because it is there on a platter? Instead of subjecting the scheme to a serious review, the central government has extended it to another five years, indicating the primacy of politics over public policy. It is patently absurd whatever be the quirky logic that entitles them. Only a small percentage could qualify

as 'most needy'. It also means that the government, due to factors other than the 'need', is spending a lot of money at the expense of other kinds of help genuinely justified.

The 'poverty line' is based on the expenditure required to maintain a minimum level of health, education, and nutritional outcome. But merely lifting a person above the line should not remain the national goal. This is far below the minimum acceptable standard of living. Much more is required for a person not to be socially deprived of the material means required to function as an optimally productive citizen. Ultimately, what a caring society must set are the minimal standards and amenities required to be such a citizen, and treat that condition as a justiciable 'fundamental right'. The state, at the appropriate level, must be made accountable. That might make the judiciary more powerful than even now. But that is a lesser risk than the state consistently short-changing the poor. This ought to be a major feature of the new Constitution.

While human 'needs' are multiple and varied, not all needs are necessities without which it is not possible to live a life deserving to be even barely-human, or a life assured of basic dignity. Basic dignity is a precious human endowment which ironically is one of a handful of guarantees of the Indian Constitution (Article 21), and which the Indian state routinely ridicules in implementation. That should include inhabitants who have been historically and socially ostracized and oppressed. That still leaves out the needs of those who Gandhi, in his famous Talisman test, referred to as 'spiritually starving', which pretty much excludes only a fistful, and includes today's 'young and restless' Generations X, Y, and Z. The realm of and route to satiate such 'starvation' is of a different genre, and deals with what

is needed for the flourishing of a person's spiritual self. The criteria to qualify as 'most needy' have to be flexible, and even within those who qualify to come under this category, the requirements of different sub-groups may be different.

Local is location, and location is spatial, and historically all political processes have spatial features. Even where one is born has a bearing on health and education, and employment opportunities. A sizeable chunk of income is influenced by the country of birth and to whom you are born. Location matters more than we realize. Income, consumption expenditure, and living standards vary from location to location, and region to region within India. The community-level governing bodies must be the ones to consensually decide, taking into consideration the ground realities, on who could qualify. It will be tricky: it has to be both objective and subjective, and not subject to pressures like the rush to be an 'Other Backward Caste' (OBC) in India now. Still, it is much easier at the people-level than at the political-level. Even for the poor, the most pressing 'basic-need' at any given time may not be the same for all. One more factor must not be overlooked. Even though their necessities and necessaries and needs might be more basic than the rest, the poor too are entitled to desires and dreams, even if they are pipe-dreams. They too have strengths and susceptibilities, and can succumb to temptation and enticement. Those may be even outside the purview of a 'basic need', like television, for example. Some may choose to semi-starve to enjoy an amenity we may consider essential or even a luxury. Morally that is not very different from the middle class, who are living beyond their means to ape the rich. The Biblical adage 'man shall not live by bread alone' applies to them too.

Presently, development policies and strategies are designed and decided for the poor without their participation in the formulation process and implementation. What is necessary is, as M. Kunhaman pointed out, 'perspectives of the poor by the poor' to arrive at policy solutions. This is one of the major causes for India's chronic across-the-board below-par performance. That is one added reason, in a society as dissimilar and disparate as India, to move the center of gravity for all political and economic arrangement and management to the community level, where people's diverse needs and fond hopes can be factored in effectively. The sum total, the ascending aggregate of all these across the length and breadth of this vast land will then translate into GDP or any other economic benchmark. In short, it is bottom-up growth and grassroots development. A top-down model focusses at the macro level, looking at things like national economic data and then homing in on more micro variables. A bottom-up approach is the opposite, beginning micro and then broadening out. It is any economic activity whose primary goal is to make the daily chores of the ordinary citizen less arduous and draining, and in the process enhance productivity. Technology should be directed towards identifying and resolving everyday problems of the proverbial common man.

That is what should count as development, not production and consumption, with scant regard to what and how. Whether it is baby food or child labor, life-saving or life-threatening, armament or ambulance it is the same. That is the way to mold a society like India into a State. Whether it makes India the third or second biggest economy in the world or slips to the tenth becomes simply statistical. The need to go beyond GDP as a measure of progress is

something the Western world is waking up to. To make that possible, there is also the need to identify indexes most appropriate to measure progress, and how these can best be integrated into the policy-making process. Instead of showing how to do that, drawn from our own culture and history, we continue to copy, with even renewed zealotry, what is failing and increasingly ecologically injurious.

While that is horizontal or geographic, as a national objective and policy-push it means that India should recognize what the fourth King of Bhutan, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck declared in 1972: "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product." In 2011, The UN General Assembly passed Resolution 65/309, "Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development", urging member nations to follow the example of Bhutan and measure happiness and well-being. It called happiness a 'fundamental human goal'. Various versions of the resolution have been put into effect in different parts of the world. The only way for this approach to be successful is by making the locus *local*, and focusing on those at that level who deserve the most the preferential help of the state. For everything is local. Economic asymmetry is local; social inequity is local. Indeed, equity across-the-board is best advanced locally; even balancing inequality and inequity is best done locally. Poverty is local; so is its solution. 'Local' does not necessarily mean rural. Where people live, whether it is a mega-city or a hamlet is immaterial. Hence decision-making must be local. The center of gravity of political policy-making and governance must be local. And local is the way India can remain—or become—'one-nation' and become a great society.

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From Elections to Sortition

Holding 'free and fair' elections, by common consent, is universally acknowledged to be the heart and soul of a democracy. That is because, in a democratic system, governance is by the proxy of people's will and preference, and elections are a means to that end. India has been universally admired for holding seventeen general elections on a mind-boggling scale and complexity. That is statistically true, but that is about all. There is an unsaid, ugly part too. While the Indian state derived its legitimacy from those elections, what they have done to Indian society is almost irreparable damage. That is the perilous paradox we face—that which is essential for India to be a legitimate democracy must be done away with for the good of its people. More than any single factor, elections to our legislatures are responsible for the moral miseries of India. They have created or fomented adversarial relations between different religions, castes, and groups, which might have, in the face of modernity, got blurred and buried rather than becoming sharper and stronger.

In post-colonial India, we have chiseled and 'Indianized' that which we accused the British of—the divide and rule policy—as a ploy to win elections and get reelected. What is worse is that by opting for the UK archetype of the so-called first-past-the-post or one-person-takes-all method of holding elections, the views and votes of the majority of people are rendered virtually toothless: just 30% votes are sufficient to come to power and remain in power. Although even the UK is experimenting with other, better methods like proportional representation at the local level, India is still wedded to the existing system. As winning at all costs,

and by every method and means, surpasses every scruple, the process of electioneering has become synonymous with the canker of corruption, moral meltdown, and a take-no-prisoners ruthlessness.

Democratic elections and their drawbacks

Elections in India have failed to act as a channel to provide a platform for the public to influence public policy, which really is the 'bottom line' of democratic government. They empower only a privileged subset of citizens who possess the financial and other resources to influence, and indeed to control, the political process.

In a modern democracy, contrary to the theory that a voter in the tabernacle of a polling booth is alone with his naked conscience, and will vote—uninfluenced by any pulls and pressures—the most suitable person to represent him, what is happening today is that the voter is still conditioned by family, community, religion, caste, and above all by the political alternative proffered by political parties. And of late, he is irresistibly influenced by competitive bribing. What was meant to be a mark of democracy has become a *mask* of democracy. Elections—technically, a formal group decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual or multiple individuals to hold public office—are no more carried out without violence, intimidation, coercion, and bribery (vote buying). All bets are off on what will not be used to rouse the meanest passions of a potential voter. Playing with fire is no deterrent.

The metrics are falling from election to election. For instance, a recent newspaper report said: "The state [Chhattisgarh] is witnessing the emergence of a Hindu–Muslim divide as a poll issue for the first time in its

electoral history."[68] This syndrome has acquired such a septic stranglehold on public life that it now appears that the only way to ensure that democracy in India functions the way it should, is to cut to size the praxis of politics and abandon elections as the sole approach to cherry-picking our stand-ins in politics. In that sense, the voter is not a 'free agent', nor is the process fair. In short, elections do not qualify for what Article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) called 'the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government'. Nor do they conform to the United Nations Resolution 63/163(1991) which reaffirms that "democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of the people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives." They have become so morally practical that, as Justice Santosh Hegde said, "It is not likely that Mahatma Gandhi could get elected to any elected position in India." The assumption that the electorate is politically identical with those who in Greek are called *hoi polloi*, the general population, does not fit our complex conditions. A small and diminishing fraction of the citizenry, the elite and the cream of the crop, has disproportionate political and economic power.

In our democracy, mass participation is confined to choosing leaders in elections managed by competing elites. The specter of caste continues to haunt the Indian Union even in the third decade of the twenty-first century. As a political commentator puts it, "Caste is really the cat that has lived among us all along. A cat we imagine doesn't even exist. But it does."[69] The importance of caste in elections becomes apparent when one reads local newspapers carrying leading articles that give the caste

composition of electoral constituencies, along with a detailed analysis of what percentage of a particular caste would vote for a certain party. The reliance of political parties on caste considerations in candidate selection and the promise of reservation on caste basis, in most party manifestos, lends credence to the dominant role of caste in elections. Rather, manifestos of all parties promise targeted sops, which range from free laptops, free electricity to free *teertha yatras*. This has given rise to what is called 'freebie culture', which, although at times clashes with good governance, is nevertheless used as a way to bad-mouth welfare schemes that have proven to be extremely beneficial for people, especially women, children, the aged, and vulnerable populations. Competitive populism, hyper-sub-nationalism, rabid religiosity, and a vote-gathering appeal to regional pride appear to be the mainstay of the election campaign today, because of which the worst kind of fissiparous tendencies are being unleashed and political parties shamelessly try to create a 'we' versus 'they' binary.

That is the paradox and a puzzle. What is baffling is why so many of us don't see the absurdity of what India has become today. Everything and anything is either déjà vu or *chalta hai*. What has happened is that this process has brought to power not the best among us but those whose interest is political or personal aggrandizement. And they have besmirched the very soul of India. We should completely re-engineer the way of choosing our rulers. It has come down to such depths that people are resorting to agitation, demanding to be paid the same quantum of bribe as was paid to their neighbor. People in power retort by saying, 'take the other fellow's bribe and vote for my party'. And voters see no shame in voting for cash: 'we will vote for

the highest bidder'. Years ago, reports said that that over half of the money spent by any party on campaigning was directly given to voters as bribe: "80% of voters surveyed felt that accepting money or gifts to vote for someone was not a bribe and not morally wrong."[70] In recent times, a minister openly encouraged voters: "Take the money from the other party and vote for my party."[71] This time it is a repeat of the same thing the same minster said earlier in a previous election. No one is aghast or alarmed in the media or ashamed in the political establishment, and the so-called watchdog, the Election Commission, scarcely even takes notice, much less call for an explanation.

The macabre mood is this: let us wait for a more brazen one from another politician, which makes this one banal. That is the depth to which elections have sunk in India. A study of key economic variables over the past 30 years shows that economic activity lost pace significantly every time there was a general election. Government spending went up in an average election year, which tended to fuel inflation rather than spur growth, suggesting that the extra public expenditure ahead of polls was largely wasteful![72]

Nothing happened, or could happen, because there is no political will or a vocal constituency for any serious change. Everyone is opportunistic, or says, 'no-hope-why-bother?' Even simply in terms of expense, elections are becoming obscenely prohibitive; the funds could do a world of good if diverted for the welfare and well-being of the marginalized masses. According to a report by the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), around Rs.55,000 crore ($8 billion) was spent during the Lok Sabha elections in 2019. The figure is almost twice the amount estimated by CMS for the last general polls in 2014. Overall, the expenditure

in the last six Lok Sabha elections between 1998 and 2019 has seen a near six-fold jump from Rs.9,000 crore in 1998, to over Rs.60,000 crore in 2019, with an estimated Rs.100 crore spent in each Lok Sabha constituency. Effectively, an approximate Rs.700 was spent per vote.[73] In terms of individual constituencies, there are at least 75 to 85 seats where individual candidates spent more than Rs.40 crore, which is over 50 times the expenditure limit (Rs.70 lakh) mandated by the polling body per candidate in a constituency. The CMS report describes the 2019 Lok Sabha poll as a 'watershed election'. It points to how a major source of poll funding is now from corporates, instead of from 'crowdfunding' via citizens and communities. Furthermore, the electorate are willingly electing candidates who are known to be muscle-men, either because they see in them shades of their own shady selves, or because they feel that it is such people who can deliver the goods and 'make the wheels of bureaucracy creak'.

What is particularly disturbing is that fighting local bodies—panchayat or municipal elections—costs as much as an assembly election today. Often, sarpanches and municipal councilors are collection agents for the higher echelons of a party, and operate in collaboration with the local administration. It is now evident that as long as our political electoral system remains as it is, and given our ingenuity to outwit and subvert every law, the only lasting reform is to abandon the fetish that 'elections stand for some kind of gold standard of what democracy ought to be'.

The degrading depth to which elections plunge the affected society is revealed by what a news story said about a recent by-election: "By nightfall, each village in Munugode constituency resembles a mega bar with the

cacophony of the guzzlers downing liquor, thanks to the byelection… According to authorities, about Rs.200 crore worth of liquor has been consumed in [a single month]… Agents face a torrid time as villagers demand gold and cash promised by candidates, leaders… In many villages, squabbles broke out over money promised by political parties… [Women] complain that the political leaders had turned their menfolk into 'drunkards and slaves'."[74,75] Whole villages are boycotting voting if not paid the bribes promised by candidates. The Election Commission, whose constitutional responsibility is to conduct 'free and fair' elections, to which end it was given extraordinary powers, should have taken cognizance of these published reports and cancelled the election. It did nothing; which reflects the level of acceptance today. Can any semblance of governance be even remotely characterized as 'representative' or democratic with such tainted elections?

A novel development in India is also what has come to be called 'vote banks'. A vote bank, in the political discourse of India, refers to a loyal bloc of voters from a single community, who consistently back a certain candidate or political formation in democratic elections. Such an attitude is often the result of an expectation of benefits, whether real or imagined, from the political formations, often at the cost of other communities. Vote bank politics is the practice of creating and maintaining vote banks through divisive policies. As it encourages voting on the basis of the self-interest of certain groups, often against their better judgement, it is considered harmful to the principles of representative democracy. Here, community may be on the basis of a caste, religion, language, or sub-nation.[76] It means that a potential voter, in

order to further a more limited group interest, is sacrificing the impartiality and independence he or she is expected to exercise in choosing his or her representative. Caste in India still plays a huge role in elections, and is a factor in the choice of candidates by political parties. And religion too. The whole apparatus is beyond repair or redemption. All this only reinforces what the veteran parliamentarian Jaswant Singh called, "parliamentary myth that those of us who sit in the Parliament, as representatives of the people, do meaningfully influence the government's thinking."[77]

The greater danger is that 'electoral evil' will become a habit, and, given the frequency of elections, it will infect other walks of life. Worst comes to worst, it is better, come election time, to make any kind of mischief or malfeasance legal! At least it will be transparent. Like war, for example, where killing is the name of the game and gets glorified. What is troubling is that electoral inducement it is no longer confined to booze, cash or gold; it now includes drugs. In the recent 2019 elections, the Election Commission seized Rs.1,280 crore worth of drugs, nearly all of which were seized in just Gujarat, Delhi, and Punjab alone. In Punjab, which already is grappling with a crippling drug problem—a study[78] revealed that one in seven persons in Punjab have become drug addicts—elections are adding fuel to the fire. According to another report, "the ugly truth is that drugs are being bought and sold with cryptocurrencies, and, as the election approaches, much of the proceeds are flowing into campaign finance."[79]

Electoral corruption is the seed of all corruption in India, which, in turn, is fueled by unaccounted money. Elections have forced governments to concentrate less on governing and development than being in the election

mode, and on staying in office. As a former vice-president of India observed, "Public governance is the first casualty of frequent elections. Public policy is governed more by political calculations to win the elections; everyone avoids implementing good public policies of larger public interest but which are not likely to be taken favorably by voters of some particular caste/community/religion/region or even by some coalition partners of the government."[80] Political 'correctness' overtakes genuine public welfare and national interest. But the real issue is the way of selecting or choosing, not the frequency or periodicity; the key question is how to ensure that a 'representative' is truly representative. In modern democracies, an elected member of a legislature virtually ceases to be the representative of his constituents the moment he gets chosen, and subsequently functions as the party representative and uncrowned king of his or her constituency.

Merit, moral turpitude, and politicization

This stands in stark contrast to our pristine times where even the king was considered a servant of the people. A person directly chosen by the people through random selection or by lot, is not only more representative than by any other way, but also functions that way because he has no other loyalty. Indeed, such a philosophy was best captured by the title of the book '*Every cook can govern*'.[81] That sounds like a radical change, revolutionary, even outrageous. It isn't. The difference is the process. In the present system, people choose from among those pre-chosen by political parties. In the so-called *sortition* method, the selection is direct, everyone is eligible and gets a chance over time.

What does not stand in between is politics, which exercises enormous power because it has a monopoly over the process; that single power has been the most corrupting influence in India. Now, anybody and everybody, in theory, is entitled to choose, but is not entitled to be the chosen one. In sortition, anybody but not everybody can choose, but everybody can be the chosen one.

If daily governance is in the hands of the common man, it does not matter too much who the titular ruler is. But since 'everyone has a price', everyone should give way to someone else continuously. That is universal suffrage. The basic premise is that for democratic governance, anyone can be as good as anyone else, and indeed everyone should have a chance to be a ruler by rotation. If people can 'freely' choose a criminal as their Member of Parliament, why not through sortition? The term '*We, the people*' cannot selectively exclude any class of people, cook or a criminal, a good Samaritan or a gangster. There are only two options: either find the optimum way to ensure that the chosen rulers truly come from the stock of the people, regardless of whoever it might be, or go for a true 'meritocracy': restrict the persons to be elected to persons of eminence, highly qualified, of high IQ or proven integrity.

Our present system is giving us neither the ones who truly mirror the masses, nor the best and brightest among us; it is often yielding the worst among us. It is neither democracy nor meritocracy; it is an accidental oligarchy and mobocracy. As the distinguished American sociologist Daniel Bell put it, "One wants men in political office who can govern well. The quality of life in any society is determined, in considerable measure, by the quality of leadership. A society that does not have its best men at

the head of its leading institutions is a sociological and moral absurdity."[82] Bell has also argued elsewhere that one reason for China's spectacular economic success is that "A relentless pursuit of meritocracy through high-quality education and placing talented persons in crucial spots in the country's governance has hugely enhanced the state's leadership capacity."[83]

In contrast, Bell says, "Looking at the past 70 odd years of independent India, it is clear that this country has chosen to abandon the path of merit in public services and has over time both expanded and deepened its adherence to the reservation road."[84] The present system we have, allows neither the cream to come to the top, nor those who truly reflect and replicate the full phantasmagoria and plurality of the country. Empowering every adult eligible to vote, it was thought, would ensure that they will opt for an alter ego, creating a kind of level playing field.

Indeed, there were sceptics even when the Constituent Assembly opted for this system. One member, Brajeshwar Prasad, found universal adult franchise as a 'violation of the tenets of democracy'. He went on to add: "Adult franchise presupposes that the electorate is enlightened. Where the electorate is not enlightened there cannot be parliamentary democracy."[85] Another member, Thirumala Rao, noted, "Without proper education, without the proper development of patriotism in this country, this is a dangerous weapon." He presciently warned that 'proper patriotism' had not trickled down, and that people would most likely exercise their franchise on the basis of provincial and communal passions. What besets and burdens Indian democracy is not universal adult franchise per se. It is a red herring, a whipping boy, a punching bag. In fact, it will

be much worse if we restrict it to the so-called 'literate' or 'educated' or degree-holders. Give the devil its due: the so-called illiterates have time and again voted in large numbers and voted well, like voting out Indira Gandhi and bringing her back when the Janata Government made a mess; or voting back Vajpayee and re-electing Modi. In all these cases, they did not choose the lesser evil but tried to prevent the greater evil from prevailing.

The issue is not how people actually vote; it is the excessive politicization of elections and elections being considered as the only purpose of politics. We must overcome the dichotomy between morality and politics, religiosity and spirituality. Politics are popularly identified with much of what we want to avoid in living a moral life. We must not think that evil or immorality is some blood-curdling crime or major sin. As G.K. Chesterton qualified it, "If there is one thing worse than the modern weakening of major morals, it is the modern strengthening of minor morals. Thus, it is considered more withering to accuse a man of bad taste than of bad ethics."[86] Immorality does not have to be by action alone. It can be vocal. That is the reason why our tongue is called a concealed weapon—the most lethal.

That is why in Hinduism, the most important constraint is vocal, called *vacaguti*—controlling one's tongue to be critical of other groups only if there is good reason to, only on appropriate occasions and always moderately. A kind word goes a long way: *daanam priya vak sahitam* ('whenever you want to give, give with a kind word'). The damage done by the political class was rather rudely well expressed by Jaswant Singh, a veteran insider, who occupied for long the highest political positions in India: "After Independence, politics became the national activity

and politicians arrogantly gave to themselves a kind of sole proprietary right over India…. The face of the Indian politician is ugly… the single greatest factor of damage to the integrity of the Indian nation has been the Indian politician."[87] The dilemma is even more acute now due to an insidious phenomena: criminalization of politics, politicization of crime, and infusion of political evil into the public sphere. When politicians are both despised and envied, their morals too get copied. So much so, it is difficult to decide who is more debauched—politician or the public, the bribe-taker or bribe-giver. Suffice that for both it is now taken for granted, almost addictive.

What we must remember is that civilizations and societies collapse not because their leaders are bad, but because normal people become bad. Not always due to demographics or disease, economic stagnation or inferior technology, alien invasion or mass migration as usually understood, but due to 'failed morals'. For example, Edward Gibbon in his '*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*' identified family breakdown, loss of civic virtue and individual morality and insatiable craving for pleasure.[88] Leaders can be replaced but not the citizens. Once immorality comes to be seen as a short-cut to social success and easy affluence, or becomes a dire necessity or necessary evil or survival strategy, for a society it is creeping collapse, and a slow death and silent strangulation.

Civilizations, cultures, and societies have withered and vanished stealthily and seemingly suddenly. That is because whatever happened was just part of daily life, not something remote or optional or extraordinary. You can't prevent it because it is not an event or any particular action, not an embellishment or aberration; it is perception.

In India, it is the *janata* who have more to account for than our *netas*, with all their foibles, for all that has run wrong. They decry the political process but bankroll it or they willingly elect known goons, or are eager to be auctioned, and then betray the one that buys them.

Then again, electoral morality cannot be divorced from the overall moral turpitude that envelops this country. It is now becoming clear that matters are becoming worse with every election; and since elections are continuous, the result is a snowball effect. It is now clear that the electoral system has belied the expectations of the members of the Constituent Assembly, one of whom said, "Because we have adult suffrage, our legislature will express the will of the nation as a whole."[89] But most people commence their political career dishonestly. As former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee noted, "Most legislators embark on their parliamentary career with a gross lie—the false election returns which they submit."[90] No amount of electoral reform, like purging campaign funding, or annulling the first-past-post system, or variants like instant-run-off-voting or single-transferrable-vote-system, can help fix what needs to be fixed. Over twenty-five countries have the proportional representative system, in which parties gain seats in proportion to the number of votes cast for them, freeing voters from what is called 'tactical voting'. The problem in India is no longer *how* we vote and what value it has; it is voting itself as it has come to be, and what it is doing to the social fabric. It has degenerated beyond repair or reform: both the system as well as the voter are almost irretrievably vitiated.

If we genuinely want to have unbeholden legislators, it is important to break the cash link in its entirety. The

only means available for doing that in a fair and democratic way is direct representation. We must remember that under the present system, the candidate with the deepest pockets wins the election, rather than the candidate who would best serve their constituents.

Vote buying leads to poor governance and undercuts citizens' ability to hold their elected officials accountable. If candidates believe that all they need to do, in order to be elected, is to pay off voters and government officials, they will have no incentive to be effective or responsive to issues their constituents care about. Along with damaging the credibility of candidates themselves, it deters upright politically-minded citizens from running for office, because it suggests that money, rather than ideas or experience, is how to win an election. That discourages qualified candidates from running for office, while entrenching venal officials in their positions. People are knowingly preferring candidates with shady backgrounds, at all levels from panchayat to parliament. The answer to why political parties in India nominate candidates with criminal backgrounds is painfully obvious: because they usually win. According to a recent report, of 4,001 sitting MLAs analyzed, around 44% of legislators (1,777) have been charged in various criminal cases (including murder, attempt to murder, and crimes against women).[91] In the 2004 or the 2009 parliamentary elections, a candidate with no criminal cases pending had, on average, a 7% chance of winning. In comparison, a candidate facing a criminal charge had a 22% chance of winning. It is now a choice between elections and democracy.

Elections have come to occupy a preponderant place in India since independence. Holding regular elections on

a massive scale, unmatched anywhere else, is one, perhaps the only one, of our proudest achievements. It is now even a cultural, festive event, people dress up, replete with colorful pageantry, flamboyant personalities. People love elections because that is when they can be pampered, can beat the humdrum and tedium of their lives, have a holiday and some fun and make some easy, extra money. The dismal dilemma is this: without elections there is no democracy, but with elections as they are now, we have only a hollow democracy and an oligarchy-cum-plutocracy. This is not new or particular to India. A long time ago, the ancient Greeks and others recognized that "elections are a way of constituting an oligarchy".[92] Actually, "when the French and American revolutions led to the establishment of the institutions that today we call democratic, the word 'democracy' was never used—the intent was for them to be oligarchic, concentrating power in the hands of the few."[93]

We all know that without prescribed and timely elections, there is no democracy. It indeed is the single most important test. India's claim to be the world's largest and vibrant democracy rests heavily on the fact that it passed that test consistently over 75 years. As per a NITI Aayog paper, at least every state has one election per year. The election process disrupts the normal administration in the area in question, and the resultant electioneering vitiates public colloquy all over the country, the lingering effect of which remains long after the election is over. Every election is now a do-or-die affair, and every political personality, all the way from the prime minister, feels obliged to do nothing but that. The idea of one-nation-one-election, a single nation-wide election every five years at all levels from panchayats to parliament, suggested by the Prime

Minister, has got mired in mistrust. It got identified with Modi, and hence automatically gets '*modi*-fied', sidelining its worthiness or worthlessness. What is forgotten is that the idea was first mooted by the Election Commission way back in 1983, and in fact that was the norm till 1967. Simultaneous elections save a mountain of money and free the administration to concentrate on work to improve the quality of living of the people. They also prevent the policy paralysis necessitated by the Model Code of Conduct, which restricts the implementation and execution of government policies and programs. This is utterly incomprehensible; governments circumvent it by doing whatever they want to do just before the deadline. One cannot, and should not, stop normal work because of elections; it also means that people can't be trusted to be true to the bribe. Most of all, it subjects the country itself, once in five years, to the viciousness, vituperation, and nausea, the ugly name-calling, the brazen use of money and muscle to bribe or bully voters. One of the former Chief Election Commissioners Navin Chawla puts it this way: "Sadly, foreign domination has been replaced in some measure by our home-grown oligarchy that possesses both 'money power' and 'muscle power'."[94]

The kernel of truth is that that which we are so proud of—holding regular elections on a gigantic scale—has made us preen and remain smug. That has given us the license to ignore everything else that is vital to the spirit of a democracy. The words 'free and fair' have become hollow and duplicitous. In its entirety, the election process has become so putrid and rotten, so ridden with 'white ants', that we are just short of 'creative destruction'. What with some kind of election, national, state or by-elections,

always on the anvil, electoral politics are compelling short-term policy sacrifices with long-term impact. Every inconsequential by-election is viewed as a 'must-win', with no scruple left unturned, and no source or resource unused. In a recent by-election to a state assembly, the content of reports said it all: 'parties splurged food and booze on voters… parties splurging black money for five months, to hold dinners and liquor parties for voters… party candidate reportedly spent Rs.250 crore till now, and is set to spend more'. It is a vicious circle: everybody blames everyone else. The politician says that this is what the public wants, and so if he doesn't give, he would be as good as dead; the people say that the politicians are all alike, and why not play along and make the most of it. As one political pundit puts it, "Political parties and political leaders do what they get rewarded for and desist from doing what they may be punished for. They don't act honestly and wisely, since they have little electoral incentive to do so." They also think that one of the perks of being in politics is to be legally a cut above the common folk. It was left to our top court to cut them to size. It reminded them: "A political leader is basically a citizen… [he does not] enjoy any immunity."[95]

The sad part is that politicians want incentives to 'be honest'. And the last thing people worry about is honesty at election time; it is an ideal time for them to make a quick buck to supplement their meagre income. And they are even taking to the streets if they are denied an equal opportunity of being bribed. It is hard to believe that electoral bribe has become almost an entitlement, and unintended denial is deemed as denied entitlement. Newspapers carry detailed accounts of such incidents. That such elections were still held was shocking. No one bothered to kick up a row in

the parliament or the media or the courts. Our overactive Supreme Court did not see fit to ask the Election Commission to explain this electoral monstrosity. That is because every party indulges in this and therefore does not want to open a can of worms. The Election Commission should have made this a test case and a golden opportunity to redeem its tattered reputation and start taming the power of money in elections. It should have cancelled the election and launched an inquiry into this brazen violation of the model code of conduct. It was not difficult to find which political party was the culprit in this case. That party should have been asked to explain, and if proven guilty, appropriately punished, sending a clear warning for far more important elections on the anvil. In another by-election, a minister openly told the electorate to take the money offered by the other party and then vote for his party! And still nothing happened; nobody felt wronged as a democrat. We are way ahead of being 'shocked' when it comes to our politics. We cannot even imagine what more awaits as we approach the 2024 general elections. Clearly, elections as we have had since Independence, have lost not only their moral credibility but stand in direct contradiction to what the Constitution has intended.

Few, if any, are exercising their franchise as is meant to be in a democracy. Certainly not according to G.K. Chesterton, who said: "A man ought to vote with the whole of himself, as he worships or gets married. A man ought to vote with his head and heart, his soul and stomach, his eye for faces and his ear for music; also (when sufficiently provoked) with his hands and feet… The question is not so much whether only a minority of the electorate votes. The point is that only a minority of the voter votes."[96] The

entire electoral system has imploded, and is beyond repair or rehabilitation. In India, the way elections are fought, social dynamics almost always dictate electoral outcomes. When castes and communities compete for political clout, the victor of an election is "mostly drawn from the group that constitutes the 'largest minority'—often led by a local gangster who banks on caste affinities (and underhand tactics) to see him through."[97] Although it is unclear whether it is their sheer laid-back or 'lazy-absence' attitude, almost one out of three voters—about 30 crore voters—do not exercise their franchise. The vast majority of them are from urban areas, young voters and migrants. Even suggested solutions like the 'one country, one nation', or altering the present Westminster system—under which a candidate the majority dislikes can win, if the majority split their votes across multiple candidates—only scratches the surface of what is wrong with Indian elections.

Sortition as a viable option

It is worth remembering that it is only for the last few hundred years that we have taken democracy to mean elections. In Athens and medieval Florence, "voting in leaders through elections was long understood as undemocratic, aristocratic, even as oligarchic, since only those with status and money could win."[98]

There is no stand-alone sanctity about 'elections'. Even tyrants hold elections and use them to legitimize their rule. And experts say the world over that this way of choosing our leaders is historically recent. One possible substitute can be the practice, in the Athenian democracy, of choosing political officials as a random sample from a larger pool

of candidates. This system came to be called *sortition*, or election by lot. It is sometimes called 'lottocracy', and as 'the random selection of rotating leaders'.[99] Athenian democracy developed in the 6th century BCE, out of what was then called *isonomia* (equality of law and political rights). Sortition was then the principal way of achieving this fairness. It is high time that India opted for *sortition*, which is a kind of 'government by jury'.

It was in Athenian democracy, two millenniums ago, that sortition used complex procedures with purpose-built allotment machines (*kleroteria*) to avoid the corrupt practices used by oligarchs to buy their way into office. To be eligible to be chosen by lot, citizens self-selected themselves into the available pool, then by lotteries in the kleroteria machines. It is the logic of the question posed by the political scientist Hélène Landemore: "If government is for the people, why can't the people do the governing?"[100] "Sortition facilitates meaningful conversations among everyday people, and has the potential to help fractured societies not only work on complicated problems, but learn how to live with one another."[101] It also "Offers a revived spin on democracy. Instead of leaving the decision-making up to elected officials, citizens' assemblies can offer a special interests-free alternative to politics as we know."[102]

Sortition in Athens

It was Aristotle who pointed out that "It is accepted as democratic when public offices are allocated by lot; and as oligarchic when they are filled by election." Rousseau echoed similar thoughts when he said, "It will be seen why the drawing of lots is more in the nature of democracy. In an aristocracy, voting is more appropriate." The Aristotelian

version was hailed as "a system in which everyone is equally a potential leader, where the values of egalitarianism prevail, both politically and economically, alongside a flourishing of individual autonomy."[103]

In the city-state of Athens, the public assembly of all the citizens was the government. The council of 500 rotated its entire membership annually. The Roman Republic featured a system of elected magistrates—tribunes of the *plebs*, *aediles*, *quaestors*, *praetors*, and consuls—who served a single term of one year, with re-election to the same magistracy forbidden for ten years. According to historian Garrett Fagan, office holding in the Roman Republic was based on 'limited tenure of office', which ensured that 'authority circulated frequently', helping to prevent corruption. An additional benefit of the *cursus honorum* or Run of Offices was to bring the "most experienced" politicians to the upper echelons of power-holding in the ancient republic. For the Greek, the word *isonomia*, which meant equality, was used interchangeably for democracy. The vast majority of Greek officials were chosen by a method which amounted to putting names into a hat and appointing the ones whose names came out.

At every turn, we see the extraordinary confidence that these people had in the ability of the ordinary person, the grocer, the candlestick maker, the carpenter, the sailor, the tailor. Whatever the trade of the individual, whatever his education, he was chosen by lot to do the work the state required. The basic point is that faith in a citizen to be ruler by himself. As Pericles, one of the greatest statesmen of the Greek democracy, put it, "Each single one of our citizens, in all the manifold aspects of life is able to show himself the rightful lord and owner of his own person, and

do this, moreover, with exceptional grace and exceptional versatility."[104]

"For more than 200 years from the 6th to the 4th centuries BCE, the Athenians practiced democracy by lot; random selection determined who would serve in most offices of the state. Not only were officials chosen by lot, but there was a limited time to their service. A person who had served was excluded from serving again immediately. The idea was that everyone would take turns to administer the state and that the citizenry would therefore consist of men who could all govern."[105] They say it is the only selection procedure that is impartial, neutral, and horizontal. They say those selected by this method do not have to flatter people to get re-elected. It will be more reflective of the population at large. It will reduce the influence of craving for power. It will show the light on short-term problems that take place when the concern is re-election, and it will return our attention to long-term issues or those on which it is harder to take credit.

The premise was that governance was democratic when public offices were allocated by lot; and it was seen as oligarchic when they were filled by election. In this system, 'the lot determines offices, power is held accountable, and deliberation is conducted in public'.[106] Not only did the Greeks choose all officials by lot, they also limited their time of service. When a man had served once, as a general rule, he was excluded from serving again, because the Greeks believed in rotation, everybody taking his turn to administer the state. In one stroke, it cured many electoral ills. The quality of life of an Athenian citizen was far superior and was well described by Pericles: "And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life

in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next-door neighbor if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people's feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect."[107] Similar practices of democracy were also said to be found in 15th century Florence (Italy), then at the height of splendor and creativity; those who held office in its core institutional and political system (the executive, the legislative councils, parts of the judiciary) were chosen by random selection, and the offices were held for short-term periods.

Sortition in Tamil Nadu, India

What is more pertinent is that the pattern of random selection of rotating leaders was the practice not only in Athenian democracy and medieval Florence but also in our own India. In fact, it is being said that the method of choosing leaders in some Adivasi communities is close to what others describe as democracy by sortition.[108] What the Adivasi situation suggests is that we need a more basic change in the way we choose our leaders, and that such a total transformation could be part of a process that fundamentally challenges social, economic and political foulness to bring about real democracy at all levels.

One good glimpse of that is the Uttaramerur model of democracy, named after a panchayat town in Kancheepuram district in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, noted for its temple inscriptions that describe a local self-governance system existing around 7th to 9th century CE.[109] The details of this system of elective village democracy are

inscribed on the walls of the village assembly (*grama sabha mandapa*), a rectangular structure made of granite slabs. It testifies to the historical fact that nearly 1,100 years ago, an Indian village had an elaborate and highly refined electoral system and even a written constitution prescribing the mode of elections. They give astonishing details about the constitution of wards, the qualification of candidates standing for elections, the disqualification norms, the mode of election, the constitution of committees with elected members, the functions of those committees, the power to remove the wrongdoer, etc. Similar inscriptions have been found in other parts of the state, indicating that an early form of democracy was prevalent in ancient times. With the system and structure that we have in place, there is no single, nationally suitable or unit that could fit the purpose. Districts, even tahsils or mandals are highly uneven, some very big in some states and very small in others. A parliamentary or assembly constituency can also be considered, which are more uniform in numbers across the country. Once the principle and paradigm are agreed upon, the optimum size for a country like India should be carefully studied.

Can elections and sortition work in tandem?

We don't have to dispense with elections altogether. We can have an array of both. Elections to the bodies closest to the people, like panchayats and municipalities, and sortition at the higher levels, like the State Assemblies and Parliament. Even then, we need to introduce deeper and substantive involvement of the people in between the elections, in governance and law-making. This, in conjunction with a new, bottom-up and ascending Constitution that introduces

political processes that shift as much decision-making authority as practical to the lowest geographic or social level of the organization, will help resolve many of the ills and issues that bedevil Indian democracy. For, there can be little doubt that the processes that entail holding elections have adversely affected efficient economic management and public policy formulation. And bold reformers have rarely won elections. Once such changes are put in place, political leaders will then fearlessly introduce reforms that the country needs, including constitutional reforms.

What is heartening is that, although not still the gold standard, globally the underlying objective has been around since the 1980s, it has been gaining momentum since 2010. While there are several models of the representative deliberative process—all of them versions of sortition and random selection—the most prominent is the Citizens' Assembly. It was first formally introduced in Canada in the early 2000s to address the question of electoral reform. The first such Assembly was organized in response to the need to create a platform where ordinary citizens, rather than political elites (who may have been influenced by party loyalties), could contribute to the design of a new electoral system for British Columbia, a province of Canada.

It is progressively being thought of as a step towards 'deliberative democracy' and 'good governance'—and a foil to the current crop of decrepit democracies and collapsing faith in public life. The latter requires special attention in the Indian context. It is easier to share a common 'faith' than have faith in each other. This stands in defiance of the fact that no other nation on earth derives its moral and social sustenance as much from faith as the Indian people do, no matter of what persuasion and coloring that belief

may be. Although it might not hit headlines, it is even said that there are "Over 500 citizens' assemblies and other deliberative processes to inform policy-making the world over. Important decisions have been shaped by everyday people about 10-year, $5 billion strategic plans, 30-year infrastructure investment strategies, tackling online hate speech and harassment, taking preventative action against increased flood risks, improving air quality, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and many other issues."[110]

What is especially conspicuous to India is that "They bring out the collective intelligence of society—the principle that many diverse people will come to better decisions than more homogeneous groups… It creates a collective consciousness and allows us to harness our collective capacity."[111] A good example is the Standing Citizens' Assembly of Paris, created in 2018, when the populist yellow vest protests hit the streets of France. The aim was to "get Parisians to really participate in political decision-making in the capital". It consisted of 100 selected residents of the city, drawn by lot through a fair and random process called a civic lottery. A sort of sortition.

Indeed, the Paris model was based on the 'Permanent Sortition' model of Belgium. What is noteworthy here is its inclusiveness: "Anyone can participate, including those not entitled to vote, namely youngsters from 16 years and people of other nationalities; the traditional process between politics and citizens is being reversed here… Unlike party politicians, citizens are independent of elections and election promises, party political positions and public attention."[112] It rings a bell, and sounds familiar to us in India. For, surely one of our greatest challenges is how to insulate the public policy path from political compulsions.

The Paris Assembly is a demographically representative 'mini public' that empowers ordinary people who wouldn't normally be involved in politics. What is interesting are the measures it takes to provide the deliberating citizens with real teeth in the political process, rather than being just a way of letting off steam. The permanent assembly representing everyday people in policy-making would have key responsibilities, such as shaping investment priorities; playing a role in agenda-setting; and launching evaluation missions to evaluate existing policies.[113]

India should create hundreds of such citizens' assemblies across the country, and politicians must not see it as a threat but a complement to the political process. Both our governments and media have shown us that they cannot wield their power responsibly. This leaves us with no choice but to rely on people power. With ordinary citizens directly contributing to priority-setting at the local level, it will also strengthen good governance. There is another factor that needs notice: localism is the only way to correct and cure the ills of exploitative capitalism, which is what the world is now in quest of. It is also the way to reduce the wide living and economic disparities between the North and the South and among states. If we remove boundaries and borders, and focus on microregions and communities, India would be a healthier and happier society. This is an important point in favor of strategic local and grassroots-centricity of policy-making and more balanced power.

The framers of our Constitution also overlooked the fact that the centrality of local self-governance was also in line with India's own traditions and practices. In fact, the very word '*swatantra*' means that (*swa* means 'self', and *tantra* is 'rule'). It was as well one of the core ideas

of Mahatma Gandhi: "My idea of *village swaraj* is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary."[114] Yet it was given a short shrift. Worse, it was not as though it was a vague or woolly idea; or that the framers of our Constitution did not have a basis or framework to go by.

Gandhi's ideas were available in the form of a sixty-page document titled, '*The Gandhian Constitution for Free India*', penned by Shriman Narayan Agarwal in 1946, the foreword of which was written by Gandhi himself, on 30 Nov 1945: "The merit of his attempt consists in the fact that he has done what for want of time I have failed to do." That says it all. We must also note that the Gandhian model was not entirely his invention. It was part of our sacred literature; references to that end could be found in texts like the *Rig Veda*, *Manusmriti*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, *Shanti Parva* of the Mahabharata, and Adi Shankaracharya's *Niti-Sara*. Even Charles Metcalfe, the then acting governor-general of India wrote: "The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts."[115]

What is so shocking is that despite broad support among the members of the Constituent Assembly, including its president Rajendra Prasad, what it finally adopted was actually not only a slap in the face of the 'Father of the Nation', but also a slap in the face of our native genius, culture, and 'indigenous constitutional tradition'.[116] Well-meaning ad hoc attempts, such as the 73rd and 74th Amendments pioneered by Rajiv Gandhi in 1992, have fallen short, since most state governments are reluctant to

vest real authority in these local bodies, particularly to raise revenue from local resources currently under the diktat of the states.

Without financial autonomy, administrative autonomy is pointless. In 2002, the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee candidly admitted: "After 10 years of the Panchayati Raj we need to retrospect." He also said, "*Zimmedari hai, jeb khali hai*… panchayats should be given a monetary uptake for development projects, just like local development funds given to members of Parliament and members of the Legislative Assembly." Vajpayee referred to a study that found that between 1992–98, each Gram Panchayat earned Rs.30,000 per annum, a block Panchayat earned Rs.60,000, and the district Panchayat earned Rs.12 lakh annually, and wondered, "How can their responsibilities be carried out with this pittance?"[117]

The reality then and even now, twenty years since, is that, cutting across party lines, there is a lack of political will to devolve power to the local bodies, which still function at the mercy of state governments. They still have responsibility without power. A World Bank study suggested that "although Indian states and the union government have been willing to recognize the panchayats to hold elections and to respect stipulations governing reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and women, they have been unwilling to vest them with sufficient 'administrative control over significant functions or fiscal autonomy'."[118]

In most states, panchayats have been handed a wide array of responsibilities without the necessary fiscal and administrative resources. More importantly, a Constitution of a country is not simply an assemblage or assortment of

disparate articles and provisions. In contrast to ordinary legislation, a Constitution embodies the fundamental choices made by a country and its people that establish the basis for political and social life. As Aristotle said, a Constitution is a 'mode of life', not solely a legal document. Modalities like decentralization, devolution, and delegation are still trickle-down or downward delegation of authority. No amount of amendments and additions can remedy the fundamental, and fatal, remiss.

The bitter pill to swallow is this: that which has been perhaps our only emblem of excellence—organizing and flawlessly conducting elections unfailingly when they become due, for an electorate of over 800 million—hasn't been that good for the people. We are in an eerie situation where all the so-called shareholders and stakeholders are happy with the current corrupted electoral system. Everyone blames the other: the public holds the politician responsible; the politician says he has no choice. There has grown a huge trust deficit between the two; if there is any trust at all, it is like honor among thieves. They grumble but neither can do without the other.

The verdict is inescapable: elections in India have failed their principal purpose; to serve as a stand-in self-governance of people; and a link between the government and the governed. Neither our representatives nor our representative bodies have lived up to their billing and build up. Political parties themselves are hardly representative of their rank and file, and thus cannot act as a conduit between people and political power and policy-making. Most of all, they have played a lead role in the tragic play of turning India into a money-minded, morally impervious society. The present way we choose our surrogates and potential

rulers must be replaced by a system modelled after sortition. That should become an indispensable part of bringing into being a new Constitution.

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7

Making it Possible: *Satyagraha* and *Ubuntu*

Why Revolution Appears Near Impossible

What holds back India from making the much-needed paradigm shift and constitutional correction is also what holds back Indian society from its much-needed political, economic, and social metamorphosis. The gnawing issue is this: How to incubate and orchestrate such a moral mutation in a country where the new normal is the post-truth, and where everyone believes everyone else is a scoundrel in sheep's clothing? How can people seriously be taken as sincere, with no axe to grind but for the good of the country? How does one start a national conversation on issues that brook no delay?

Yet another headwind that is pushing us back is a cocktail of civic cynicism, populist nihilism, political process turning into a poisoned chalice, absence of any articulate advocacy for any remotely unsettling alteration, the most basic of them being constitutional. In the public domain, an entire vocabulary has been developed and elaborated to capture this toxic temper. People read, watch, and absorb everything within their respective 'echo chambers'.

Every difference is dissonant, and mudslinging has replaced the middle ground. Disempowerment is camouflaged as inclusive development. Consensus has come to be capitulation. Amorality is being touted as pragmatism, mediocrity as modesty. There is no such thing as undisputed fact; a deepfake could do the job. There are no more metaphorical *Lakshmana rekhas* that one cannot transgress, or taboos on public morals that cannot be tinkered with. The future is not a factor; since we won't be there then, our grandkids be damned! We are laidback about things that ought to make us reel with righteous anger, and we are gung-ho about things that ought to be more worthy of our wrath. If all this is even near true, how come nothing happens even incipiently in the civic consciousness?

What does happen is for a personal, parochial, or pocketbook issue. Existential threats like the climate crisis do not compel; only the political class, or even the pundits, lose any sleep. As for the public, it is so comatose that it is unable even to connect climate catastrophes like melting Himalayan glaciers, record heat levels and off-season cloudbursts to climate change. India's scale and size is so humongous that it cuts into the scope for a country-scale call to arms for a truly cutting-edge initiative for a better India. Moreover, Indians are so politicized and polarized that they run the risk of being infiltrated by vested interests or get played by politicians. That is why so much in India is revolting but there is no mass revolt. Inequity, injustice, discrimination and exploitation simmers and simmers, but never boils over. We are more worked up over 'political wrongs'—which focus on questions of political governance—than over 'social wrongs', which are defined as there being something wrong with the social reality'.[1]

That is why there has never been a country-wide agitation in India for any nation-wide cause, against what should be conscience-pricking (but now casual) economic inequality, inequity, and injustice. The poor never rise in revolt. The rich can sleep in peace literally within a stone's throw of a destitute; a billionaire can short-change a minion and go scot-free. The deprived see their deprivation as divine dispensation; or they are painfully aware that defiance will only aggravate their misery, and no one, not even their poor comrades, would extend help if required.

And all this means that mounting any nationwide marshalling of collective consensus around any critically important national cause, is either a lost cause or a loose cannon, a matter of daunting odds. But tables get turned when the cause is parochial, partisan or something singularly specific. Our passions are activated only when our proximity and personal life and faith appear to be at risk. Immediacy, not importance, is what we value. We don't mind multiple riots, but we cannot tolerate a revolution that disturbs the rhythm of our routine life. We are laid back even when we are confronted with our own genre of 'Grapes of Wrath', and the 'five faces of oppression—exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence'.[2]

All this leads us to one telling takeaway. Nothing can, and will, happen for any better in India unless we find a way to snap people out of the soul-stilling stupor of sullen grievance and ethical indifference they have slipped into, which makes the intolerable acceptable, and which makes them acquiesce to any indignity and injustice without a whimper. People must be triggered to care about things that make their lives comfortable or miserable, rather

than about what their ethnic or religious sensibility takes umbrage against. It does not mean negation or dilution of their roots or culture, faith, or ancestry. What we need to do is to harmonize them, and that is best done bottom-up.

Despite all the progress we have made and all our impressive achievements, we are still shy of tackling a troublesome problem head-on, and we are willing to live with things that ought to be intolerable for any proud people. That 'we' includes not only the high-class and the high-brow, but also the philistines and the middle class. The rest, whatever they number, are too feeble and fragile to mount any mutiny. Perhaps towering above all else, the most compelling requisite of the hour in India is to incubate, institute, and incentivize the creation of a revolutionary, not reactionary, mass base. This base should be one that can surmount the forces of inertia and the grip of vested interests, and not one that descends into a mob manipulated by the politicized or moneyed mafias. But in India, all the decks are stacked against it: everyone who matters will see any such stir as encroachment on their own place in the sun, as an encroachment into their own comfort-zone, a rude riffle of their own sense of stability and security.

Any crisis in India, even if it is life-threatening, does not create tough thinking; we merely try to survive the crisis often by doing nothing. We sanitize it by grumbling silence and callous smugness. What is now a cause for complacency should be changed into a catalyst for convulsive change. Violence, by thought, word and deed, is so omnipresent and penetrating that we tend to forget the huge role played by nonviolent protest in the form of civil disobedience in the Indian Independence movement. Although not absolute, ahimsa was always the undercurrent in our culture. As

a society, we must get back to that kind of engineered turbulence to incubate and induce, generate and stimulate the people-centered support for the kind of basic and radical corrections and realignments needed in our polity and body politic. Resorting to violence or vigilantism will be apocalyptic for India; in fact, it plays into the hands of the state. What has also acted as a non-motile lid is a composite of civic inertia, popular apathy, and a sort of a settled sense that India is like the demon Kabandha, in the Ramayana, who swallows and ingests every living thing leaving no trace. That India is still intact structurally, despite its all too apparent defects and deficiencies, gives credence to this feeling of hopelessness.

To get out of such self-despair we need to mobilize a 'critical mass' of motivators, those whom Anand Giridharadas calls 'persuaders',[3] who could be at the frontlines to cut this cycle. But even that appears to be an insurmountable hurdle because the number that can trigger the 'tipping point' is both immense and indeterminate, especially given India's multitude and magnitude. This indeed is a global deterrent for any evocative change. What is needed is to motivate, inspire, and energize a small percentage—which, according to recent research is as little as 3.5%, or about five crore Indians—to become its vanguard. A report about this research revealed that "There weren't any campaigns that had failed after they had achieved 3.5% participation during a peak event."[4] That is less than the number of the top ten most populous states of India. It is clearly doable as a mass of people, though not easy because of our national character, which boils down to the mindset and the psychic dispositions of ordinary, average Indians, which itself has been an assimilating amalgam over the ages. That is, we

must stop asking ourselves, "Someone has to do it, but why me and what can I do?"

Whichever way one looks at it, India is truly at a momentous moment, and it could well be at an irreversible tipping point. There is no way of knowing except to believe that it still is a turning point. India needs serious and deep course corrections on several fronts. We have no option but to go back to the drafting board, craft a more conducive context, a new foundational framework. Foremost is our Constitution; it must be revered, but it must be replaced. Indeed, it was intended to be replaced from the moment it was adopted. Even if we amend or improve the Constitution a hundred more times, it won't let us get by. What is surprising is that our leaders proudly and tiresomely proclaim and repeat that India was the 'mother of democracy', while being ignorant of the model it was—far, far different from the one that they, with equal vehemence, proclaim their allegiance to.

A good illustration is the book, *India: The Mother of Democracy*[5] published by the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR). The book details the presence and evolution of democratic traditions in India, an important part of which is self-governance in the form of *gana*, *samithi*, and *sabha*. What is also important to note is that while we think of ancient and medieval India as composed of kingdoms, in reality there were also several republics. For example, the Lichchhavi people, who settled in what is now Bihar (6th–5th century BCE), were renowned for their republican government, which had a general assembly of the heads of the leading Kshatriya-caste families. Independent India consciously abandoned that mode of collective governance. We proudly parade our rich democratic republican

vintage, but studiously set aside getting any inputs or ideas for our own republican governance. But, taking a step back, this ought to be no surprise. This too is part of our Orwellian 'double speak and forked-tongue'. Politicians in India appear to have far surpassed Orwell's skills in this department.[6]

That forked tongue syndrome fits us too, not only our rulers. How can our leaders be better than us? If they are they won't be there. They too live in the same milieu of adharma and moral short-cuts. Like a former Chief Justice said of his fellow judges, "they don't fall from heaven", we can't expect them to be more loyally moral than the citizen-king. The onus is clearly on the people. To borrow Abraham Lincoln's phrase, it is up to the 'better angels' among us, to try and stop and reverse the sweeping and suffocating grip of adharma, which, for this purpose, we can view as a kind of paralysis of immorality, reinforced by mediocrity. There is almost nothing on the ground, institutional, intellectual, political or theological, that could be of much help. What is so conclusively dispiriting and seemingly a no-go is that almost no one in the system is a loser, and every stakeholder in the society acquires a stake in the *status quo*—save those who are too weak to stake a claim. That means that those who have a reason to revolt find a reason not to put on the line what little they have and the rest will ensure they stay that way.

India lacks that which is a *sine que non* for any radical structural or social transformation: the stomach for avoidable suffering and optional hardship. Even the people at the bottom of the heap, who are historically denied the opportunity to rise up to their full potential, like the Dalits, shrink from rocking the boat, not because

they like it but because they know that, at the end, they could come no better. One of the many reasons for this could be the complex web of socioeconomic relations in which the Dalits were trapped, which made sure they never had the resources, organization, or the morale to revolt. Furthermore, all Dalits all over India are not alike. A Dalit life in Bihar could be vastly different from one in Kerala. They know that they will be let down even by well-meaning intellectual activists, or betrayed by other fellow-sufferers. Such is the suffocating strength of the boot pressing on their face. The soil of India is so soaked with the sweat and 'cruel tears', *à la* Shakespeare (*Othello*), of the exploited and maltreated and the spit of the sponges and leeches, that it cannot any more sprout anyone different. Any perchance aberration will be ruthlessly stamped upon. That makes any concerted effort that comes close to a mass movement end up as 'dead on arrival'. The few that call out are so few and far between that any stone cast by them causes no ripple.

To truly harmonize and harness our indigenous strength and endogenous potential, we need also to overcome our fascination for anything foreign. We are less worked up at the prospect of an intruder in our home than putting up with a troublesome neighbor. Unlike the Chinese, we do not view a Westerner as a barbarian; we view him as benevolent, if not admirable. Does it have anything to do with the famous Sanskrit verse of Vedic vintage, *Atithi devo bhava*, which exhorts us to consider an uninvited or unexpected guest as god? It was not a matter of simply feeding and sheltering a weary traveler and offering hospitality. *Atithi*, distinct from *Abhyagata*, is a person who shows up out of the blue and stays as long

as he/she wants. It is important to meet such people's needs with love and care and give them the best place to stay. One should view this as an integral part of the social fabric, not in isolation. What perhaps happened is that this got isolated and somehow robbed our psyche of any resistance to an intruder and invader, and perversely became wariness of our own kin and kind.

Another reason could be that India was for most time politically splintered and bereft of any pan-India unified power, and all rulers tried to expand their territory and were frequently engaged in wars with each other, which made them weaker and shattered their economy, and which, in turn, proved beneficial for the invaders. Everyone was so jealous of each other that they didn't mind betraying and conniving with the *paradesi*, the foreigner. Over centuries of usage, a *paradesi* became more *pyaari* (dear) than a *desi* in our unconscious mind. Not just any paradesi but one with a fairer skin, or one with lesser melanin. This trait and tendency is now hard-wired.

Anything foreign—foreigner, foreign land, imported goods, travel, language—gets a respectable tag. We just cannot 'accommodate' each other's perceived needs, wants, demands, priorities compulsions, vanities and weak points, and ensure that it does not weaken or damage the national need. We can rarely, if ever, agree on a coherent national agenda on any subject of any importance. Other countries don't face the dilemmas to the same degree as they are not so riven and driven by heterogeneity and variety. Is this what is dragging down India, always pulling us back when we thought we were over the hump? This was because most people are more focused on pulling each other down than lifting themselves up. In psychology, this is known as

the 'crab bucket theory'. When a single crab is placed in a bucket, it can usually crawl out. However, when several crabs are placed in the same bucket, none of them can escape, as they keep pulling each other down. Our poor performance in all walks of life is more interpersonal than personal, more shared than singular. We value individual reward so much that we resist recognizing other people's achievements. There's no doubt that the most 'basic need' of India now, is a confluence of two parallel processes circling around several simultaneous frontlines. This alone can affect seminal and seismic changes. That is nothing short of a transformation of how we live, what we live for, work and react, and respond to other people. Here again any other model anywhere else to bring it about won't suffice.

Even to dream of a 'dim utopian' future, we need a deep and balanced appreciation of history; we should neither glorify it nor vilify it. That is the big problem we face. We tend to dismiss history as something that happened a 'long time ago' and that is now out of context. The fact is that we are all molded by what happens in our time. We face situations that are new now, but which might have happened many times before. Studying them would help.

We are not a people at peace because we are not at peace with our past. We are not at peace with our past because we are at sea with how to relate with it. We have always shied away from an honest reckoning with our past. We are not sure if our past is a bane or boon, burden or beacon. Should we ignore it, bury it, and simply take off from the present and look ahead? Or should we celebrate and revisit and try to recreate it? Should we derive inspiration or treat it like a nightmare? How much are the people themselves responsible for whatever happened to

them? Were they victims or accomplices? Was there any defining characteristic flaw that led India to its historic ills and troubles and to its eternal quest for an identity that bonds its people and heals its wounds? A nation's bygone times serve a double- purpose, as an anchor and harbor, as a source of intrepid inspiration and well-grounded imagination. As the cliché goes, those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

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Satyagraha and *Ubuntu*

Given this context, what India needs today is a mix of two moods and models: 1) the élan and ethos of *satyagraha*, and 2) what in Africa is known as *Ubuntu*. We are familiar with the first: Gandhi's tool to peacefully wage a war on the British, actually adapted from a similar word, '*sadagraha*' (firmness in good cause).[7] The second refers to the *philosophy of Ubuntu*. The term 'Ubuntu' is used in various African languages to denote 'I am because of you' or 'a person is a person because of or through others'. More philosophically, it means 'the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity'.[8]

For Nelson Mandela, Ubuntu reflected 'the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others; if we are to accomplish anything in this life it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievements of others'. It was in this spirit that Desmond Tutu (who

led and guided the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa) used the word as a tool of reconciliation and a balm to soothe the wounds of a fractured post-apartheid South Africa. Barack Obama said that Ubuntu is the word that captured Nelson Mandela's 'greatest gift'.[9] This goes to show that India needs to incubate a new breed of '*satyagrahis*', or a brigade of 'spiritual soldiers' large enough to constitute a 'critical mass', not to face the policeman's *lathi* and imprisonment as in India's freedom movement, but to be the face and front in the struggle to bring about the painful paradigm shifts, both personal and collective, without which Indian society can never be what it ought to be.

On the personal front, we must arrest and reverse the pervasive moral turpitude and the suffocating mediocre mindscape. The key is to change our 'sense of shame', and make it 'a shame' *not* to feel ashamed when we act with ill will in mind, and with willful blindness to other's well-being. That would be very functional to stimulate desirable types of behavior or to even to inflame a 'moral insurrection', or rather reverse its current trajectory—moral compromise invites no social stigma, and ethical cowardice is regarded as playing safe.

Collectively, we should veer away from moral indifference towards making moral *difference*, from moral cowardice towards moral *activism*. Collectively, there is also the need to combat religious radicalism and intolerance of non-believers and safeguard participatory pluralism. The temptation is to resist both self-glorification and self-loathing, to fear the future and linger in the peace-of-the-prison kind of 'comfort-zone'; to go along to get along and let things go wherever, so long as our own little

nest is left unruffled. This time, the answer will lie not in civil disobedience but in civic activism, for sweeping social justice and panoptic philosophical, policy and pragmatic focus on the needs and lives of the 'most needy'. Our scriptures suggested the same. The Rig Veda tells us to "become God's instruments and distribute fortune to the poor and needy… not sharing your wealth with others is sinful, and anyone who eats alone incurs sin."

What we see in present-day India is '*dura-graha*', not '*satya-graha*'. People-protest and mob fury is often misdirected: where robust shouting is needed, there is thundering silence; where revolution is required, there is not even revulsion; where violence is rightfully warranted, there is cozy complacency. Political prudence prevails over the lives and health of our own children, an inference which is inescapable when we juxtapose the damage done to the health of the citizens of Delhi, no less than our national capital, due to polluted air. According to one estimate, every third child has asthma in Delhi. A report says Mumbai is not far behind; doctors in the city worry that the rise in cases of respiratory diseases due to air pollution could leave many with long-term impacts. All because, in the words of John Steinbeck, "a profit cannot be taken from an orange."[10] That is illustrative of the price of politics and the current model of GDP-generated near-nirvana.

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Be the Hundredth Monkey

All this labored narrative, this litany of India's pressing problems, pushes at us one brutal bottom line—nothing of any value or validity can mutate or morph for the better in India unless the many faceless, voiceless citizens become protagonists and activists. Our pacesetters are pedestrian, our political masters run for cover as we do when they face the crunch, and our public intellectuals are as venal and mediocre as the rest. The truth of the matter is that we do not have anyone of the towering spiritual stature of Mahatma Gandhi or Desmond Tutu. The call of the moment is to instigate a moral insurrection, a mass movement to overcome all that is coming in the way of what needs to be done for Indian renewal and renaissance. That ought to encompass 'reconciliation' with the 'truth' of our checkered past times, to remove the cobwebs and cat's cradles that make correct comprehension so complex. Its absence is what is coming in the way of our visualizing the correct trajectory for India's future, more immediately, for *India at 100*.

For a nation's past can be both a cautionary tale as well as a beacon in a dark tunnel. That is why even our goals and guidebooks are alien. In the absence of inspiring and inclusive leaders who can lead us single-handedly, we have to fall back on multiple mini-Mahatma Gandhis, and our own versions of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. How many they need to be, or how to pluck them out of the morass of the human mass will never be clear. The only way to break free is to embed in the consciousness of a cross-section of people of intensity and integrity, the desire and determination to make a difference, much like

the monkey in the allegory of the *Hundredth Monkey*, and become a catalyst for a change in the consciousness. Being the hundredth monkey means shouldering responsibility; as Gandhi said, *being the change* you want to see in India, and behaving such that you can be the tipping point for Indian renaissance.

As a people, we must honestly look at our hurts faults, failures, mistakes, and missteps, and then, accept them and meditate upon the questions: *What can we learn? How can we build anew?* We should desist both from self-glorification and self-flagellation, self-pity and self-hate. Repetition is not always dooming. If it is grandeur and glory, it can give the itch and urge to emulate. If it is infamy and ignominy, it can tell us what not to do and give the resolve to abort any iteration. What is ironic about we Indians is that we tirelessly talk of our proud heritage—what A.L. Basham called *The Wonder That Was India* (1954)—but many feel shy of being identified with it, and decry any move to recover and recreate that resplendent inheritance. We should desist from either viewing our pre-1947 past with 'disdainful dismissal', nor should we turn it into a lost Shangri-La. The balance we must strike is to study and evaluate the ideas that made it one of the most prosperous societies in the world while not being what we now call a 'nation-state'. What we fail to appreciate is that although multiple kingdoms existed, these kingdoms were not like the countries of today without a passport and visa regime needed to cross, and all kinds of regulations on movement of goods and people.

What the world should be in a utopian vision is what India was at that time. That is the essence of what real 'globalization' is supposed to be. A constant exchange of

ideas, people, goods, and scholarship took place throughout the sub-continent, largely unmindful of the boundaries of kingdoms. We need to recreate such a paradigm and ethos, with appropriate adjustments to suit the changed times: this is the only way that India can advance and arise to its full measure. Any other way is a way to the skid row.

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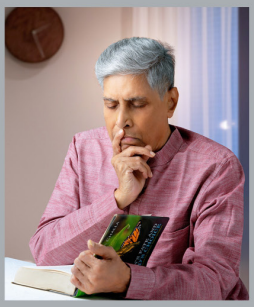

Bhimeswara Challa, born in 1935, is a native of India and a 'double-retiree', one from the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and the other from the United Nations. During a career stretched over forty years, he shouldered multiple responsibilities, from the grassroots to the global, which gave him at once an insider's depth and an outsider's objectivity. Alongside, he has been a part-time but passionate writer, and has published two novels, *Kshantavyulu* (The Pardonables) and *Aprasyulu* (The Ostracized) in his mother tongue (Telugu) and several articles in newspapers and journals in India, UK, and USA. The two previous scholarly nonfiction books that bear his name were the critically acclaimed *Man's Fate and God's Choice—An Agenda for Human Transformation* (2011), and *The War Within between Good and Evil: Reconstructing Morality, Money and Mortality* (2020). An abridged version of this latter nonfiction book was also separately published for an international audience traumatized by the corona pandemic.

The present book, which really is a blueprint for a new resurgent India, is a product of the author's passionate concern about where India seems headed and how to put it back on the right track.

The book, after envisioning a vision and an agenda for India's renaissance, concludes that to make it practicable calls for nothing less than a moral insurrection and a mass movement on a national scale. There is no other way to do the kind of seminal and seismic transformational change that the nation requires. Time is ticking, and any further tardiness and timidity will not only imperil the state but even the society. But the basic problem is that the masses themselves are fractured and venal, consumed by 'meaner cares', wanton wants and narrow passions.

The way to break the conundrum, this book suggests, is to move away from mass-scale to a 'critical mass' of committed but concerned citizens—about five crore people, according to latest research. To imbue that right attitude, the book proposes a dual approach, fired-up with the spirit of Indian *satyagraha* and calmed-down by African *Ubuntu*. As for the first, the '*agraha*' should now be directed against injustice and inequity. The second emphasizes the principles of empathy, sharing, and cooperation to heal wounds and resolve common problems. But that still leaves the question, 'In a society in which '*sab chalta hai*' has become a comforting alibi, how do we nudge anyone to break away from the mainstream?' The way out is for the wavering pack to draw inspiration from the allegory of the 'hundredth monkey', and imagine themselves to be that sole individual whose advocacy and activism could create a ripple effect across the country.

Few books, if any, on India contain provocative and avant-garde ideas on so many subjects so vital to India's future. This is the book for all those who wonder what went wrong and who are frustrated with what politics and elections have done to the common man, and for those who feel righteous anger but just cannot find a way to make a difference. For all those, this book could help quell their conscience and save their souls.

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